The New Criterion

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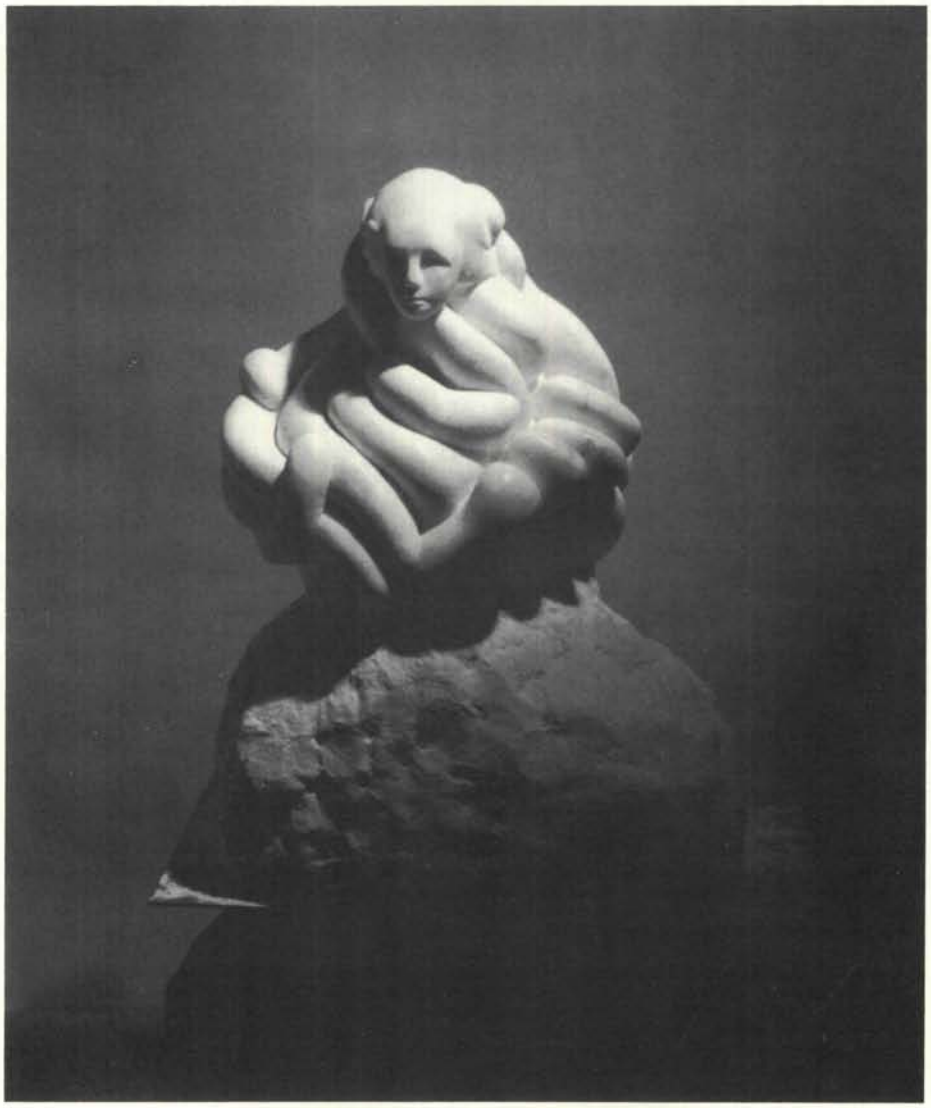

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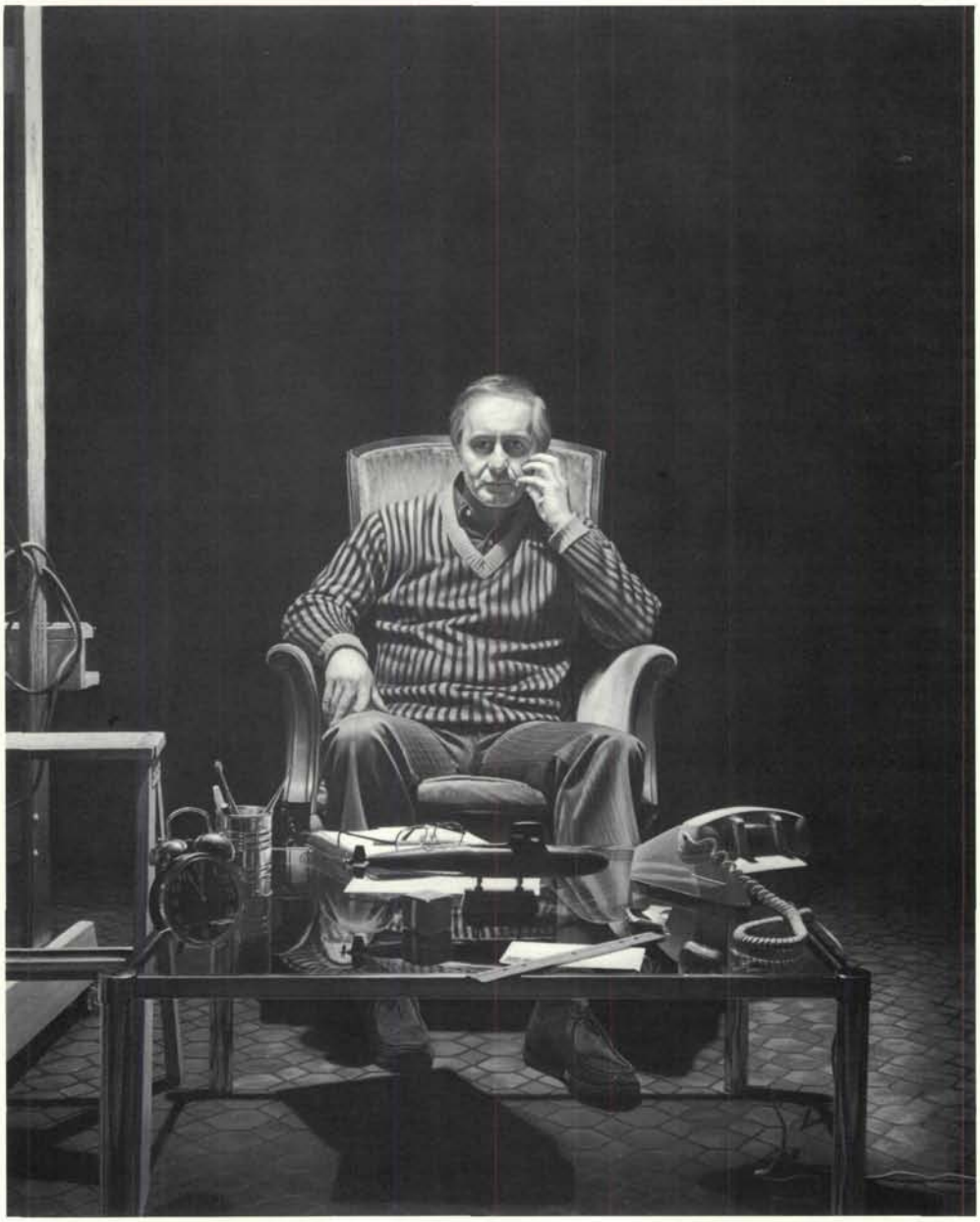

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In search of Edward Thomas

by Robert Richman

When we look back on the period in English poetry that stretches from 1910 to the early 1920s, Edward Thomas looks more and more to be its most significant poet. That there were many poets of the Georgian persuasion writing at the time may come as a surprise to readers who identify the period exclusively with Pound, Eliot, and the modernist school. But even more surprising is the fact that Thomas, the best English poet of the period who did not belong to the modernist school, still remains a more or less obscure figure, especially in this country. This is true despite the fact that recent years have brought forth a good many books about Thomas's life and work. That these have not had much of an effect on our view of the period is a measure of the influence the modernists (and their critics) continue to have in determining our view of this literary epoch.

To Robert Frost, who was living in England at the time and who had many affinities with certain aspects of the Georgian sensibility, Thomas was "at that moment [1913] . . . writing as good poetry as anybody alive, but in prose form where it did not declare itself." When, at the prompting of Frost, Thomas finally did turn to poetry, his verse reflected the best qualities of his prose in distilled form: brilliant clarity devoid of all rhetoric and presumption. Thomas himself characterized something of its quality when he spoke, in a review of Frost's first book of poems, of "an absolute fidelity to the postures the voice assumes in the most expressive intimate speech."

> While you are listening
> To the clear horn,
> Forget, men, everything
> On this earth newborn,
> Except that it is lovelier
> Than any mysteries.
> Open your eyes to the air
> That has washed the eyes of the stars
> Through all the dewy night:
> Up with the light,
> To the old wars;
> Arise, arise!
>
> ("The Trumpet")

Thomas's ideas about poetry had taken some time to develop. When he went up to Oxford in 1897 Pater was all the rage, and Thomas became a disciple of *The Yellow Book*. A year later, however, he turned his back on fashion for what would be the first of many changes: "What a small man Pater is! He is always talking about style." Instead he decided to pursue, as he says in lines from the poem "The Chalk Pit," "the truth/Or nothing" in himself, his subjects, and his prose. It proved to be a lonely and difficult endeavor. He produced roughly twenty-five full-length books between 1897 and 1914 (on such subjects as Wales, Oxford, Keats, Maeterlinck, Swinburne, and Pater), while editing many others and continuously reviewing for newspapers. But for all his

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labor—and it was monumental—Thomas achieved neither fame nor fortune. Indeed, times were often rough, especially in the early years. As one commentator observed, his "scrupulous dedication to the truth of interpretation" as a reviewer made it difficult for him "to make a living as a literary journalist, while less perceptive reviewers flourished." Thomas, a natural melancholic, grew disconsolate. He experienced numerous bouts of depression and had more than one nervous breakdown.

Thomas met Frost for the first time on October 6, 1913. Lawrence Thompson, Frost's biographer, writes: "When their identical light-blue eyes met, each may have felt that he saw the other mirrored. Obviously they had more in common than a love of literature." Indeed, both men, in their mid- to late-thirties by this time, had experienced similar difficulties as writers. For twenty years Frost had vainly attempted to interest the American public in his poetry while Thomas, buried by the commissioned work he took on to support himself, felt that his chances of producing truly expressive work were diminishing. Their similarly difficult circumstances were matched by equally depressed sensibilities. Both had left their wives for extended intervals and threatened divorce. Both, too, had contemplated suicide. No wonder, then, that Frost was to Thomas "the only person I can be idle with," while Thomas was to Frost "the only brother I ever had."

Just as remarkable were their nearly identical feelings about verse, arrived at independently in the years before their meeting. As Andrew Motion points out in his recent book on Thomas's poetry,[1] Frost's notion that behind all verse—behind, that is, all syntax, idiom, and meaning—should be the echo of a previously heard conversation was nothing much more than a restatement of Thomas's idea that poems be centered around the phrase rather than the foot (making the rhythms of speech dominate meter). Both believed, in a word, that poetry should be colloquial, "more colloquial," said Thomas, "and idiomatic than the ordinary man dares to use even in a letter."

Frost and Thomas had numerous meetings and took many walks together between October 1913 and February 1915, when Frost sailed for America with Edward's son Merfyn in tow. During one meeting they first heard news of the war. Frost tried to convince Thomas to return with him to the States, where he might help him set up as a farmer in New Hampshire. Initially Thomas was taken with the idea, but later he changed his mind and decided to join the army. It was at once a patriotic and (typically) self-destructive move. But it was also, oddly enough, the final shock his creative system would need to start producing poetry. As Frost said, "the decision he made to go into the army helped him make the other decision to be a poet in form." The paradox of the war as both a creative and destructive force in Thomas's life is a horrible one, but entirely consistent with the spirit of his best poems.

Thomas wrote verse at a fast and furious pace up until the time he went to the front, where he was killed (at Arras) by the direct hit of a shell on Easter Monday, 1917. Frost wrote the following letter to his widow, Helen:

> Dear Helen:
> People have been praised for self-possession in danger. I have heard Edward doubt if he was as brave as the bravest. But who was ever so completely himself right up to the verge of destruction, so sure of his thought, so sure of his word? He was the bravest and best and dearest man you and I have ever known. I knew him from the moment when I first met him at his unhappiest that he would some day clear his mind and save his life. I have had four wonderful years with him. I know he has done this all for you: he is all yours. But you must let me cry my cry for him as if he were *almost* all mine too.

Of the three ways out of here, by death

1 *The Poetry of Edward Thomas,* by Andrew Motion. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

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where there is no choice, by death where there is a noble choice, and by death where there is a choice not so noble, he found the greatest way. There is no regret—nothing I will call regret. Only I can't help wishing he could have saved his life without so wholly losing it and come back from France not too much hurt to enjoy our pride in him. I want to see him to tell him something. I want to tell him, what I think he liked to hear from me, that he was a poet. I want to tell him that I love those he loved and hated those he hated. (But hating will wait: there will be time for hate.) I had meant to talk endlessly with him still, either here in our mountains as we had said or, as I found my longing was more and more, there at Leddington where we first talked of war.

It was beautiful as he did it. And I don't suppose there is anything for us to do to show our admiration but to love him forever.

Robert

Frost himself, along with Helen Thomas and no doubt others, wanted very much to hear Edward Thomas called a poet, but, in the years following the war, never did. The primary reason is that, although nearly all of the one hundred and forty-four poems now published[2] are on many counts "modern" (not the least because they reflect Thomas's deeply depressed sensibility, once euphemistically described in a letter to his friend Gordon Bottomley as his "habit of introspection"), Thomas was never a part of the (then) blossoming avant-garde. Thomas's isolation from the modernist movements of the day certainly may have been one cause of his melancholy. Whatever the case, Thomas's fate was sealed, for in the years after his death the modernists ran roughshod over anything that could be put down as quaint or the least bit Romantic—and this included not only Thomas but the entire Georgian school. It seems cruelly appropriate, then, that Thomas's gravestone in France says nothing of his ever having written a line.

2 Most recently in *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas,* edited by R. George Thomas, Oxford, 1978.

The search for Edward Thomas's quality as a poet is made all the more difficult because the whole Georgian movement is now so totally misunderstood. The Georgian poets are regarded today, if they are regarded at all, as one of the casualties of modernism. Yet at the time they did cause something of a stir in the literary world. Their earnest pastoralism and deep love of little things was the latest, and probably most significant, challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy of the day—Victorian scientific materialism—that dominated the world of their youth. Represented best by Tennyson, this orthodoxy displayed, in the eyes of the Georgians, a love of nature divorced from a true belief in it—and a poetry that had an unhealthy coldness, or at least a vagueness, of emotion. The Georgians also rebelled against the (by then) numerous other currents Victorianism had spawned—"art for art's sake," for example. They sidestepped other intellectual temptations of the time, too—the "universal" theories of Ruskin and William Morris, and Swinburne's theory (and practice) of vice and debauchery. In the end, poetry seemed to them even further separated from the everyday experiences of the real world. In place of these imagined essences of life, the Georgians chose what they felt was life itself, in all its unpretentious, mundane glory.

Though Thomas's poetry never appeared in Edward Marsh's *Georgian Poetry* anthology (five volumes of which were published between 1911 and 1922), he was a friend of such central figures in the movement as Rupert Brooke, Walter de la Mare, Lascelles Abercrombie, and Gordon Bottomley, and no doubt believed in the importance of their undertaking. Marsh expressed their common belief in the prefatory note to the first volume of the anthology: "English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty . . . [and the] Georgian period . . . may take rank in due time with the several great poetic ages of the past." If this seems a large claim now, reading a poem such as Rupert Brooke's "Clouds," one can understand Marsh's enthusiasm.

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Down the blue night the unending columns press
In noiseless tumult, break and wave and flow,
Now tread the far South, or lift rounds of snow
Up to the white moon's hidden loveliness.
Some pause in their grave wandering comradeless,
And turn with profound gesture vague and slow,
As who would pray good for the world, but know
Their benediction empty as they bless.

They say that the Dead die not, but remain
Near to the rich heirs of their grief and mirth.
I think they ride the calm mid-heaven, as these,
In wise majestic melancholy train,
And watch the moon, and the still-raging seas,
And men, coming and going on the earth.

It was such work that would prompt Marsh to continue to claim, after the war, with modernism taking firm root in the culture of England, that *his* revolt was the truly significant one. Indeed, in the preface to the final volume he writes, already a bit defensively, of the postwar experimental verse that it is in its formlessness "like gravy imitating lava."

But the avant-garde not only succeeded in making the Georgians seem superannuated by contrast; it also made them the butt of its jokes. Who, it was asked, could in his right mind, after an event of such cosmic proportion as the war (an event that, as more than one writer put it, separated one age from another much the same way the Middle Ages was separated from the Renaissance), write a poem about "Goldfish"?

They are the angels of that watery world,
With so much knowledge that they just aspire
To move themselves on golden fins,
Or fill their paradise with fire
By darting suddenly from end to end.

To the postwar literary generation, the fact that Harold Monro, a Georgian poet, and a very good one, could write such a poem (he also wrote one admonishing a man for taking his furniture and kitchen utensils too lightly) seemed the height of absurdity. Richard Aldington, then an acolyte of Imagism, in his memoir of the period, *Life for Life's Sake,* wrote of Monro (whom he called the Marshal Joffre of poetry—"always ten minutes late and two divisions short") that he often exhibited the "disquieting Georgian symptom" of running into the garden to "embrace the trees" and (Monro's supposed words) "laugh at the stars." "Of course," says Aldington, "I knew all Georgian poets love trees, but I thought he should not be so ostentatious about it."

To be sure, Aldington's own poetry needed the support these patronizing remarks were designed to provide. But better poets, including many of the more significant modernists, felt very much the same way. Stephen Spender, for example, dismissed the Georgians as "gently unambitious." And C. Day Lewis, writing in *A Hope for Poetry* (1934), called the Georgians "a sadly pedestrian rabble, [who] flocked along the roads their fathers had built, pointing out to each other the beauty spots and ostentatiously drinking small-beer in a desperate attempt to prove their virility . . . were rolled under and nothing marks their graves." Such views left poets like Frost, Robert Graves, and above all Thomas either woefully misunderstood or virtually unread.

The legacy of critics like Day Lewis is still with us today. One finds, for example, under the entry "Georgianism" in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (a repository, in its own way, of current values), the following remarks.

> [Georgian poetry is] . . . typically bucolic in mood, presenting delicate emotion in meter for the most part traditional. Their poetry is often Wordsworthian but lacks the intensity of vision which transmuted Wordsworth's descriptions of nature into great art. Consequently, they are often accused of sentimental pastoralism and "week-end ruralism."

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The continuance of the Georgians' brand of romanticism after the war, the *Encyclopedia* says, "failed to reflect the contemporary sensibility. In consequence the influence of the movement rapidly waned in the early 1920s."

What all this means as far as Thomas's reputation is concerned can be gleaned by examining the curious fate meted out to him in the standard anthologies. With the exception of Dame Helen Gardner's selection in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1972) and Philip Larkin's *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse* (1973), all serious anthologists through the years have seemed to agree with the far too modest evaluation of Thomas found in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (4th edition, 1967): "his verse shows a loving and accurate observation of the English pastoral scene." For example, the tiny place (usually one poem) Thomas is given in collections such as Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935* and Quiller-Couch's *The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1918* (1939) is occupied by second-rate poems supposed to represent his "bucolic" Georgian spirit. This is also true of the ampler selection of his work in *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse* (1953), edited by John Heath Stubbs and David Wright. In both *An Oxford Anthology of English Poetry,* 2nd edition, put together by Harold Lowry and Willard Thorp, and *The Faber Book of Modern Verse,* edited by Michael Roberts and revised in 1965 by Donald Hall, no poems by Thomas are included at all.

Misrepresented and excluded as a "Georgian," Thomas has also often been left out of the company of war poets by critics and editors, who all seem agreed about what constitutes a war poem and what does not. There is an especially cruel irony in this. Thomas was, in many ways, the archetypal Georgian poet. But he was also the period's preeminent war poet, and this is very much the result of his having brought the best aspects of the Georgian sensibility to his response to the war. Indeed, his Georgianism allowed him to understand war in a deeper way than such less-talented, but better-known, war poets as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Nevertheless, John Lehmann could claim that Thomas "only wrote one poem about the issues of the war." Bernard Bergonzi, in his influential study, *Heroes' Twilight,* states that "[v]ery few of his poems are actually about war." And John H. Johnston writes in *English Poetry and the First World War* that Thomas "refused to let the conflict interfere with his nostalgic rural visions." In *The Great War and Modern Memory,* another highly regarded critical work, Paul Fussell makes but three references to Thomas (compared to nearly one hundred for Sassoon and Owen), while the once famous anthologist Oscar Williams did not give Thomas's work a place in his well-known collection *The War Poets.*

Thomas's confused status as a war poet is evident in the latest anthology of war poetry, *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (second edition), edited by Jon Silkin.[3] While Silkin hardly mentions the Georgian movement in his introduction (which takes up nearly one quarter of the entire book), he does manage to say, in a variety of imaginative ways, that poetry which "doesn't try and do away with, or limit, the war that causes the suffering [is] indulgent." And, presumably because his criterion is not, in his words, the "self-approving male ideal of disinterested contemplation," but instead "the need to feel rather than see clearly," he can only muster up one rather uninspired paragraph about Thomas—though, it must be admitted, his representation of Thomas in the book is not as bad as his prescriptions would seem to require.

If by "about" war we mean rehashing battles, lamentations for the dead, or depictions of blood- and sorrow-drenched fields, Thomas's poems certainly do not qualify. The one or two poems that do expressly discuss the war reveal only a tempered patriotism. One such poem is called "This is no case of petty right or wrong."

3 Penguin, 1981.

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This is no case of petty right or wrong
That politicians or philosophers
Can judge. I hate not Germans, nor grow hot
With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers.
Beside my hate for one fat patriot
My hatred of the Kaiser is love true:—
A kind of god he is, banging a gong.
But I have not to choose between the two,
Or between justice and injustice. Dinned
With war and argument I read no more
Than in the storm smoking along the wind
Athwart the wood. Two witches' cauldrons roar.
From one the weather shall rise clear and gay;
Out of the other an England beautiful
And like her mother that died yesterday.
Little I know or care if, being dull,
I shall miss something that historians
Can rake out of the ashes when perchance
The phoenix broods serene above their ken.
But with the best and meanest Englishmen
I am one in crying, God save England, lest
We lose what never slaves and cattle blessed.
The ages made her that made us from the dust:
She is all we know and live by, and we trust
She is good and must endure, loving her so:
And as we love ourselves we hate her foe.

One of the other explicitly patriotic statements Thomas made—and it is more a statement of kinship and love—occurs in his novel *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans* (1913):

> Deny England—wise men have done so—and you may find yourself denying your own father and mother—and this also wise men have done. Having denied England and your father and mother, you may have to deny your own self, and treat it as nothing, a mere conventional boundary, an artifice, by which you are separated from the universe and its creator. To unite yourself with the universe and its creator, you may be tempted to destroy that boundary of your own body and brain, and die. He is a bold man who hopes to do without earth, England, family and self.

Thomas lowers the pitch considerably in "Tears."

It seems I have no tears left. They should have fallen—
Their ghosts, if tears have ghosts, did fall—that day
When twenty hounds streamed by me, not yet combed out
But still all equals in their rage of gladness
Upon the scent, made one, like a great dragon
In Blooming Meadow that bends towards the sun
And once bore hops: and on that other day
When I stepped out from the double-shadowed Tower
Into an April morning, stirring and sweet
And warm. Strange solitude was there and silence.
A mightier charm than any in the Tower
Possessed the courtyard. They were changing guard,
Soldiers in line, young English countrymen,
Fair-haired and ruddy, in white tunics. Drums
And fifes were playing 'The British Grenadiers.'
The men, the music piercing that solitude
And silence, told me truths I had not dreamed,
And have forgotten since their beauty passed.

This patriotism lacks the rhetoric of patriotism one finds traces of in Brooke's "1914" sonnets.[4] Both "Tears" and "This is no case . . ." are accounts of moods; they never seem to express one sentiment exclusively. Similarly, Thomas frames the story in "As the team's head brass" (which involves a farmer complaining that he has "lost many" to the war) with a pair of lovers who appear at the beginning and end of the poem: agents of fertility and growth in the midst of war. (Even the stumbling horses seem to be reacting to the chaos war has brought.) In another poem, "Roads," Thomas begins with a Wordsworthian invocation to nature

4 The difference between the sensibilities of the two poets could be gleaned from their respective remarks once war was in progress. Brooke: "Well, if Armageddon's *on*, I suppose one should be there." Thomas, in reply to the question, "Do you know what you are fighting for?" said, while crumbling a handful of dirt between his fingers, "Literally, for this."

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in his own pared-down, plain-spoken style.

I love roads:
The goddesses that dwell
Far along invisible
Are my favorite gods . . . .

But in stanza fourteen one reads:

Now all roads lead to France
And heavy is the tread
Of the living; but the dead
Returning lightly dance:

Whatever the road bring
To me or take from me,
They keep me company
With their pattering . . . .

Thomas feels immense pain for the dead, but refuses to grieve for them. Instead, he brings them back into his life as everpresent companions who might alleviate his worldly pain. Thomas's shifting rhythms underscore his various moods and emotions, his reliance on suggestion rather than statement. A reviewer of the first edition of Thomas's collected poems, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1920, spoke of his habit of placing crucial words after line-endings, creating "a certain suspension of emotion that is itself emotional." Likewise, the poems themselves are suspensions of war that are all about war. Emphasizing, as he himself would have explained it, phrases rather than feet, Thomas effects a tension between the established meter and the patterns of speech—a perfect arrangement for poetry that seeks to bring together opposing feelings: confidence and insecurity, love and fear, nature and war.

"The outward scene," wrote F. R. Leavis (in one of the first intelligent and serious discussions of Thomas's poetry), "is accessory to an inner theatre": hence Thomas's half-articulations of the "inner" psychological scene, which in turn illuminates the many sides or "moods" of reality. Thomas's imaginative interaction with the scene pushes his language beyond denotation to connotation—for him, just as valuable a way of writing about war as any catalogue of death and destruction.

What is the nature of the "inner theatre" Thomas brings to his war poems? For the man who contemplated suicide more than once before the war, it was the certainty of his own imminent death in the war.

I have come to the borders of sleep,
The unfathomable deep
Forest, where all must lose
Their way, however straight
Or winding, soon or late;
They can not choose . . .

. . . I hear and obey
That I may lose my way
And myself.

("Lights Out")

Rain, midnight rain, nothing more than the wild rain
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me
Remembering again that I shall die . . .

Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,
Like me who have no love which this wild rain
Has not dissolved except the love of death,
If love it be towards what is perfect and
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

("Rain")

Such poems hardly conform to facile notions of the pastoral, the nostalgic, the rural, or the sentimental.

In "Blenheim Oranges," Thomas goes further with death.

Gone, gone again,
May, June, July,
And August gone,
Again gone by,

Not memorable
Save that I saw them go,
As past the empty quays
The rivers flow.

And now again,

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In the harvest rain,
The Blenheim oranges
Fall grubby from the trees,

As when I was young—
And when the lost one was here—
And when the war began
To turn young men to dung.

Look at the old house,
Outmoded, dignified,
Dark, untenanted,
With grass growing instead

On the footsteps of life,
The friendliness, the strife;
In its beds have lain
Youth, love, age and pain:

I am something like that;
Only I am not dead,
Still breathing and interested
In the house that is not dark:—

I am something like that:
Not one pane to reflect the sun,
For the schoolboys to throw at—
They have broken every one.

Thomas mentions war only once in this poem, but war is its overriding subject nevertheless. The regenerative image of dung (which Motion notices) expresses, along with the rivers, harvest rain, and "grubby" Blenheim oranges, the comforting knowledge that all things, including war, must pass. But again Thomas's melancholy colors this perception with a very "modern" doubt: even the naming of months, an emotional effort to assure himself of time's potential healing, does not seem to work. (One feels the poet would like to touch them, if he could.) The "old house" no doubt represents England, but Thomas extends the metaphor to stand for himself, too: "still breathing and interested" though no longer able to "reflect the sun" (do the work of representing nature in poems) for the "schoolboys" (is he referring to the younger generation of blood-and-gore poets, or the modernists?) have delegitimized the task. "Blenheim Oranges" conveys, then, four threats Thomas felt closely: the death of the countryside, of England, of Edward Thomas the man, and of Edward Thomas the poet. This is surely one of the consummate poems of the First World War.

As Frost remarked, the war made "some kind of new man and a poet out of him." The impressions Thomas records in his recently discovered War Diary (included as an appendix to R. George Thomas's edition of the poems) refute the notion that his sensibility was merely that of a romantic idealist who, as John H. Johnston claimed, "refused to let the war interfere with his nostalgic rural visions."

> Yesterday . . . I became very depressed and solitary by the evening. Very soon, I expect to have no time or room left for depression.
>
> Torburn had a screaming nightmare.
>
> Some faces you see, drinking once and never again.
>
> Heavy firing at night. Restless.
>
> Shelling at 5:30—I don't like it. I wonder where I shall be hit as in bed I wonder if it is better to be on the window or outer side of room or on the chimney or inner side, whether better to be upstairs where you may be worse crushed.

And, on the very last page of the Diary,

> the beauty of this silent empty scene of no inhabitants and hid troops, but don't know why I could have cried and didn't.

Less than three months after having his first poems accepted by *Poetry* magazine,[5]

5 It was Frost who sent them to Harriet Monroe on January 7, 1917, with a letter that began: "Here I sit admiring these beautiful poems but not daring to urge them on anyone else for fear I shall be suspected of admiring them for love of their author."

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and only five days after reading an enthusiastic review of his work in the *TLS* (he appeared in a Georgian anthology called *An Annual of New Poetry*), Thomas was killed.

It still seems so odd that poetry of this quality was overlooked while writers of smaller gifts achieved such notoriety. Is it too much to suggest that the answer to this paradox lies beyond a mere appreciation of poetry? The poetry of the celebrated war poets is more explicitly "about" war than Thomas's, but to say this is hardly to make a judgment about poetic merit. In this regard, it might be worthwhile to consider the work of two of the "accepted" war poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. The poetry of Sassoon and Owen is similar, but it is from an order of experience entirely different from Thomas's. Indeed, one can scarcely believe that these three men were at times, no doubt, very close to each other along the front line.

After responding to the initial news of war with what might be described as a Rupert Brooke-ish state of enthusiasm, Siegfried Sassoon eventually started writing (after 1916, the year in which, in David Jones's words, everyone would "sense a change") the bitter and sarcastic poems that would become his stock-in-trade. A section of "Counter-Attack" reads:

> The place was rotten with dead: green clumsy legs
> High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps
> And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,
> Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely-filled;
> And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,
> Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.

Sassoon's traditionally metered verse (usually rhymed decasyllables) clashes with grotesque detail and a tone of venomous sarcasm.

> If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
> I'd live with scarlet majors at the Base,
> And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
> You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
> Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
> Reading the Roll of Honour. 'Poor young chap,'
> I'd say—'I used to know his father well;
> Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap.'
> And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
> I'd toddle home safely and die—in bed.
>
> ("Base Details")

Feeling that the war had been unnecessarily prolonged by the "majors at the Base," Sassoon wrote poems that were the equivalent in intention to his "Soldier's Declaration" of 1917, a much-publicized document indicting the British leaders that, but for the intervention of some of Robert Graves's high-placed friends, would have caused Sassoon's court-martialing. Instead he was sent to a mental hospital—a fact which, along with the poems, would later give Winston Churchill reason to point to Sassoon as one whose mind had given way, a psychological casualty of Prussian militarism.

Churchill's deliberate misreading notwithstanding (he was never known as a connoisseur of verse), poems such as "Lamentations" had a wide effect on Sassoon's generation.

> I found him at the guard-room at the Base.
> From the blind darkness I had heard his crying
> And blundered in. With puzzled, patient face
> A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying
> To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.
> And, all because his brother had gone west,
> Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief
> Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was kneeling
> Half-naked on the floor. In my belief
> Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

Sassoon's sarcasm was not only directed at war leaders. In "Glory of Women," for example, he vents his spleen against those female civilians who were largely ignorant of the horrors of trench warfare.

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You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when
we're killed.
You can't believe that British troops 'retire'
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they
run,
Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with
blood.

Frank Swinnerton noted that Sassoon was "not entirely incapable of enjoying other peoples' malice," and this poem, along with many others, suggests the expectation that readers would enjoy his. But Sassoon's maliciousness stems more from his envy towards these women for whom the soldiers are sacrificing their lives; hence the feeling that, as V. S. Pritchett said of Richard Aldington, "the whole war had been declared against him personally." Sassoon's protectiveness towards the parts of the dead soldiers' bodies has its source in the intimacy he demands of these men, even in death.

He was a Prussian with a decent face,
Young, fresh, and pleasant, so I dare to
say . . . .

I found him there
In the gray morning when the place was held.
His face was in the mud; one arm flung out
As when he crumpled up; his sturdy legs
Were bent beneath his trunk; heels to the sky.
("The rank stench of those
bodies haunts me still")

Although Sassoon is "modern" in his combinations of stately decasyllables and utter contemptuousness, he seems more concerned with propaganda than with the aesthetic value of his work. Attempting to duplicate the immediate shock that photographs of war victims elicit—only geared to a more specific goal, that of ending the war—Sassoon's poems beg many poetic as well as historic questions. Again and again he accuses British civilians and generals of misdeeds but never acknowledges the actual causes of war. Nor does the poetry keep to its "photographic" or realist aesthetic. "Banishment," from *Georgian Poetry 1918-1919* (and not reprinted in Silkin's book), shows that Sassoon will abandon even realism for the requisite effect.

Thus, what is at stake for Sassoon is not aesthetic consistency or historical veracity, but rather the immediate effect of the poet's indignant feeling on the reader—making the poems, in the words of Bernard Bergonzi, closer in execution and result to "good poster art." Sassoon himself was quite honest on the issue: "Thinking in pictures is my natural method of self-expression. I have always been a visually submissive writer."

Another "visually submissive" writer, but one who has been accorded higher praise than Sassoon, is Wilfred Owen. "Of the Georgians," wrote Day Lewis, "only one rode the whirlwind: Wilfred Owen." Certain lines in the poem "Greater Love," Day Lewis said, affected him "as being both more poignant and more rich with poetic possibility than anything else done during this century." Day Lewis saw him as one of his generation's three "immediate ancestors," the other two being Hopkins and Eliot. Edmund Blunden called him a "poet without classification of war or peace," while Silkin includes more poems by him in his book than by any other writer—and remarks in the introduction that his own taste could be determined by how well represented each poet is.

Owen is certainly a better poet than Sassoon. He handles his more or less traditional meters with greater skill than Sassoon, and his para- or half-rhymes (shell/shall) are bolder experimentally than anything Sassoon ever tried.

My glorious ribbons?—Ripped from my own
back
In scarlet shreds. (That's for your poetry
book.) . . . .

A short life and a sorry one my buck!

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We used to say we'd hate to live dead-old,—
Yet now . . . I'd willingly be puffy, bald,
And patriotic. Buffers catch from boys
At least the jokes hurled at them. I suppose
Little I'd ever teach a son, but hitting,
Shooting, war, hunting, all the arts of hunting.
("À Terre")

The clashing sounds in an Owen poem, always very carefully constructed, lend his perceptions more resonance than Sassoon's rather bland colloquial talk, which often seems so flat and uninspired that it borders on vulgarity. In addition, Owen's irregular rhythms suggest an inconclusiveness with regard to his political position that the language seems to contradict entirely—and the result, whether intended or not, raises questions that Sassoon's one-note poems too willingly answer.

But though Owen's work constitutes a finer achievement, the sentiment remains the same.

GAS! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning . . . .

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gurgling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell, with such high zest
The old Lie, Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.
("Dulce et Decorum Est")

These poetic flash-cards very much resemble Sassoon's, except perhaps for their slightly more embellished images ("froth-corrupted lungs"). Yet Owen too hoped to affect public opinion, and even went a step further than Sassoon by actually carrying photographs of war casualties with him, which, "at the appropriate moment of civilian obtuseness" (as Silkin elsewhere pointed out), he would bring forth for the desired effect. Owen likewise had little use for women—perhaps less even than Sassoon—and in his letters reveals a strong, often violent revulsion against "ignorant" British civilians. (In one letter, quoted by Bergonzi, he wishes the Germans would bomb a boat full of British partyers.)

Finally, again as with Sassoon, the war becomes confused with Owen's homoeroticism. By Paul Fussell's count, almost one-third of the seventy-nine poems in Day Lewis's 1964 edition of Owen's poems contain the word "boy" or "lad." "Pederast bathing verse," explains Fussell, "became wildly popular" in the Aesthetic Nineties, and one can spot the influence throughout Owen's work.

Boys
  Bursting the surface of the ebony pond.
Flashes
  Of swimmers carving thro' the sparkling cold.

But this fantasy vision—and one can find it in most of Owen's early poems, many of which are written with an appropriate Keatsian flourish (another influence of the Aesthetes)—the war quickly revised into an aching compassion for the now beleagured "boys" at the front. (One can see how Thomas's regenerative image of dung is an apprehension of the dead both Sassoon and Owen are incapable of. Homoerotic longing, taking place only in the here and now, cannot readily identify with biological reproduction.) "Above all I am not concerned with Poetry," wrote Owen, "instead War, and the pity of War." "The Poetry," said Owen, "is in the Pity."

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O Life, Life, let me breathe,—a dug-out rat!
Not worse than ours the existence rats lead—
Nosing along at night down some safe rut,
They find a shell-proof home before they rot.
Dead men may envy living mites in cheese,
Or good germs even. Microbes have their joys.
And subdivide, and never come to death.
Certainly flowers have the easiest time on earth.
"I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone,"
Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be
stunned: . . .

Sit on the bed. I'm blind, three parts shell.
Be careful; can't shake hands now; never shall.
Both arms have mutinied against me,—brutes.
My fingers fidget like ten idle brats.
("À Terre")

Unlike Thomas's active imagination, where "inner theater" constantly controls the outward scene, the photographic imaginations of Sassoon and Owen passively duplicate the horror of war. These static poems—which are just as often passive in their verbal construction as well—reflect Owen's stated view of action in the human world: "Passivity at any price! . . . Suffer dishonor and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill."

It was precisely this celebration of passivity that so offended Yeats, when, as editor of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935,* he refused, against the insistence of many, to include any of the war poets. He gives his reason in the introduction to the book: "Passive suffering is not a theme for poetry . . . . If war is necessary . . . it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of a fever, remembering our comfort at midnight when our temperature fell." Owen's work, Yeats remarked elsewhere, is "all blood, dirt, and sucked sugar stick." He felt that "man's soul is active" and that the best creative work arises when the imagination actively interacts with the world's plastic material, rather than simply records a fortuitous scene or thought, where, according to Yeats, "no great event becomes luminous in the poet's mind." If the fortuitous scene or thought before the poet's eye happens to be one of unrelieved suffering, it is as if, says Yeats, "some blunderer has driven his car on to the wrong side of the road—that is all."[6]

What photographic poetry clearly lacks is the poem's embodiment of its own creative unfolding. It is the process that transforms (slowly, through the accretion of words and images) the poem's merely documentary details into a vibrant account of a reality much more profoundly complex than a photograph could capture. This process of self-discovery—in which each word in the poem is revised, embellished, and shot through with meaning by the next—is what makes poems what they are rather than fortuitous photographs. As Frost said, the best poems "begin in something more felt than known . . . [and] saying as you go on more than you were going to say, and coming with surprise to an end that you knew only with some sort of emotion." Exploratory poems such as these also avoid the tacked-on moral. "Anything more than the truth would seem too weak," said Frost, pinpointing the problem with Sassoon and Owen. Also, poems that depend on metaphors—as Thomas's do, and Sassoon's and Owen's do not—give the reader the actual degree of correspondences among a verbal image, what it purports to describe in nature, and the abstract statement behind both. Such an exercise—Frost called it a poetical education, or an education by metaphor—allows the reader to determine for himself how close a particular

6 Yeats acknowledges that his source for this notion is Matthew Arnold, who, writing in the preface to his *Collected Poems,* stated his reason for omitting "Empedocles at Aetna": "What are the situations from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is invariably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also."

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utterance (and not just one in poetry) is to both experience and emotion. The politically "activist" or photographic poetry of Sassoon and Owen, with its arrogant (and false) presumption of an exact correspondence between image and reality (a fault of the passive eye that does not metaphorically "work" on the material it sees), fittingly called propagandistic, promotes precisely the kind of automatic acceptance of that correspondence between image and world that it is the first job of poetry to question. "Poetry was born from magic," wrote Day Lewis. "It grew up with religion: it lived through the age of reason: is it to die in the century of propaganda?" One hopes not, but if it does, at least part of the blame will lie with Lewis himself.

The lyric poems of Edward Thomas represent one alternative. But, according to Silkin (echoing a remark Professor Johnston makes), "the lyric mode of poetry [is] totally unfitted . . . for adducing the experience of war in any real way." (Thomas: "The lyric will prosper, at least as long as individualism makes its way in literature.") Clearly, Thomas's lyrics cannot but inhabit an uncomfortable place in Silkin's anthology. A poem is only useful, says Silkin, if in it "anger and compassion are merged, with extreme intelligence, into an active desire for change, a change that will realign the elements of human society in such a way as to make it more creative and fruitful." Thomas, who once remarked that a poem by Thomas Hardy was an "impersonal song which seems to me the best of the time, as it is least particular and occasional," is clearly guilty under Silkin's dictum that "compassion [which is impersonal and not explicitly anti-war] walks behind the system . . . . We shall never not be political again." As for the "candidly imperialist[ic]" Rupert Brooke, his "patriotic aspirations of the ruling class" were nothing more than the crass "export of English goods."

It doesn't seem to matter to Silkin that Owen has, to use Silkin's own words, the "at times censorious, certainly didactic" approach of a Kipling or W. E. Henley—an imperialist and a pro-war poet respectively (neither of whom could be accused, incidentally, of Silkin's "disinterested contemplation").

Silkin is not entirely alone on this issue. Fussell too finds it easier to praise works that are, or can be, interpreted as anti-war; thus his transformation of Edmund Blunden, a truly nostalgic and pastoral poet, into a man "hurling himself totally and emotionally into opposition" to the war. Only in a critical atmosphere as deeply suspect as this could a positively wretched early pro-war poem of Sassoon's called "The Kiss" (written, according to Robert Graves, in a state of genuine fervor) be offered later as a satire against war—and be *accepted*. One certainly allows Sassoon the privilege, as T. E. Hulme said of H. G. Wells, of moving from "a fatuous optimism to a fatuous pessimism," but this seems like an even more superficial move. But bad faith aside (Sassoon boasted elsewhere about the monetary "advantage of being a soldier poet"), the literature of sarcasm loses much of its intensity once its moment has passed.[7]

Thomas's "language not to be betrayed," however, only cautiously attempts to represent the reality these other poets seem scarcely to do justice to poetically. Thomas's "inner theater," by fashioning the metaphors, rhythms, and tones that endlessly scrape against reality, reminds one of the crucial difference and distance between reality and its representation in language. It is precisely this remove that allows Thomas to be a war poet and a nature poet simultaneously. This inherent two-sidedness, or

7 Richard Aldington, for one, seems to have learned this lesson. After writing a number of satirical novels during the collective depression that struck England's intellectuals in the decades after the war, he wrote, while in the midst of another: "After listening to Mr. Chamberlain's speech over the radio on the morning of 3 September 1939, I threw the novel I was writing into the waste basket. It would be absurd to denounce calamity; ignoble to satirise people fighting for their existence."

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contradictoriness, which Thomas takes advantage of in his poems, is the crux of the poetic act—the source of its ability to educate by metaphor. The poetry of Sassoon and Owen betrays this essential aspect of poetry, and its legacy is the critical voice of Jon Silkin: Homer's "ability to juxtapose opposed sets of ideas [in the *Iliad*] . . . we try not to behave like that now . . . we do not ask the literary, the over-literary questions, when and by whom."

The nature and terms of Silkin's entire discussion in his introduction to *First World War Poetry* displays a complete indifference to Thomas's qualities as a writer and war poet. In effect Silkin has rejected Thomas for not having measured up to his political standards. This attitude obviously speaks for a more widespread opinion of Thomas—one in which he, along with the Georgians, is found to be lacking in either political or aesthetic radicalism.

Yet we have before us the extraordinary example of Thomas's verse, which not only breaks free of the critics' obtusely narrow definition of "Georgian" but also redefines the equally narrow definition of "war poetry" that has been established by critics like Silkin.

> The green roads that end in the forest
> Are strewn with white goose feathers this June,
>
> Like marks left behind by someone gone to the forest
> To show his track. But he has never come back.
>
> Down each green road a cottage looks at the forest.
> Round one the nettle towers; two are bathed in flowers.
>
> An old man along the green road to the forest
> Strays from one, from another a child alone.
>
> In the thicket bordering the forest,
> All day long a thrush twiddles his song.
>
> It is old, but the trees are young in the forest,
> All but one like a castle keep, in the middle deep.
>
> That oak saw the ages pass in the forest,
> They were a host, but their memories are lost,
>
> For the tree is dead: all things forget the forest
> Excepting, perhaps, me, when now I see
>
> The old man, the child, the goose feathers at the edge of the forest,
> And hear all day long the thrush repeat his song.
>
> ("The Green Roads")

This immensely disturbing poem was written on June 28, 1916, when Thomas was only a few months away from embarkation to France. It contains all the traditional Romantic images: goose-feathers, a cottage, an old man, a child, the month of June, and a thrush. But, in an ironic reversal, the poet has them all lead down "the green road" to death (represented by the forest). But in an even more significant reversal, Thomas replaces the equally traditional figure of the embattled young soldier with the death-bound man and child. This is indeed ironic, but its net effect is wholly unironical. Thomas's chosen figures convey a deeper, more significant grief—for all England, and, by extension, all Europe—than the narrower images of Sassoon and Owen (like that of many earlier war poets) convey for the fate of a particular class, generation, and sex. Thomas's version of war is at once more humane and more terrifying than that of Sassoon and Owen because it understands the war as a tragedy of wider dimension, something that threatens not only the nation's people but the "memories" (line fourteen) of its entire history and culture too. It would seem, then, that "The Green Roads" is scarcely evidence of the remark of one critic that Thomas is "utterly at home in the world of nature."

The next to last poem Thomas wrote, called "Out in the Dark" (which sounds strikingly like Frost), makes an even more compelling connection between the poet's

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physical death in war and the imminent loss of the ability to write *his* particular kind of war poetry.

> Out in the dark over the snow
> The fallow fawns invisible go
> With the fallow doe;
> And the winds blow
> Fast as the stars are slow.
>
> Stealthily the dark haunts round
> And, when the lamp goes, without sound
> At a swifter bound
> Than the swiftest hound,
> Arrives, and all else is drowned;
>
> And I and star and wind and deer
> Are in the dark together,—near,
> Yet far,—and fear
> Drums on my ear
> In that sage company drear.
>
> How weak and little is the light,
> All the universe of sight,
> Love and delight,
> Before the might,
> If you love it not, of night.

The crisis of civilization that the war embodies endangers nothing less than an *entire way of seeing*. But, says Thomas, given the chance, its "weak and little" light might perhaps someday become, once again, a powerful "universe of sight."

The passive eye Yeats observed in the war poets in 1936 has become a common affliction today. To him, the trenches must have been the twentieth century's ghastly enactment of the Victorian mechanistic universe—where, fighting against an unseen and unpredictable enemy, poets like Sassoon and Owen thought they were creating a truly *engagé* poetry. Unfortunately, poetry such as theirs is only *engagé* in the world of politics and propaganda. In the world of poetry it is its opposite.

Another development, the result, at least partially, of the homoeroticism of Owen and Sassoon, is, as Fussell points out, a contemporary literature in which truth can very often only be divined through obscenity. Tracing the line between the First World War writers and Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, and Joseph Heller, Fussell wrote:

> . . . it is the virtual disappearance during the sixties and seventies of the concept of prohibitive obscenity, a concept which has acted as a censor on earlier memories of "war," that has given the ritual of military memory a new dimension. And that new dimension is capable of revealing for the first time the full obscenity of the Great War. The greatest irony is that it is only now, when those who remember the events are almost all dead, that the literary means for adequate remembering and interpreting are finally publicly accessible.

Silkin would seem to agree: in his chosen translation of a poem by Ungaretti, one or two lines (and therefore the entire poem) are rendered in a sexually charged way. In Thomas's poems, and the tradition of "disinterested" lyrics of which he is a part, the sexual self is never the poet's primary subject, as it is in Sassoon and Owen's work. Thomas's subdued eroticism, directed at the people and places of England, never explodes into the raw sexuality Silken and Fussell think is necessary for the literary interpretation of war.

Finally, the long legacy of irony and sarcasm that the war made the standard vocabulary for artistic communication in the twentieth century has, among other things, obscured the real achievement of the Georgians and Thomas especially. War poems such as "Out in the Dark," "Blenheim Oranges," and "The Green Roads" cannot be appreciated as long as the Georgians are not given their due as artists and interpreters of the First World War; and that won't happen, it seems, as long as irony and sarcasm are perceived as the war's most ideal literary mode.

Thomas is sooner or later going to emerge as the central poet of the Georgian period, properly defined. It is now a question of time—the poems must be read and reflected

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upon, and that takes time—but also a question of how powerfully these non-literary prejudices will continue to postpone our appreciation of his importance. Unfortunately, much seems to stand in the way, for today the sentimentality of patriotism that he (and Brooke) was accused of showing has been replaced by a sentimentality of cynicism and "opposition"; for a sentimentality of politics we have exchanged, it would seem, an aspect of our creative will.

Thomas did not have Frost's combative spirit—something necessary for such poets in this century. This is the central reason his reputation has suffered so much over the years. One wonders how long it will take for us to come to terms with a man who, as Leavis said, was incapable of insincerity, or where we can find a place for a poet who, as W. H. Hudson remarked, was "one of the most loveable human beings I have ever known."

> Some eyes condemn the earth they gaze upon:
> Some wait patiently till they know far more
> Than earth can tell them . . .
>
> ("Some Eyes Condemn")

Thomas refused the glibness the war called forth from so many of its "poets," which is one reason, no doubt, that we know so little—and misunderstand the little we know—about this complex, inscrutable man. But his outward reticence should not blind readers today (as it clearly has in the past) to his haunting and deeply expressive poetry about the century's first significant crisis.

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Notebooks of Joseph Joubert

selected and translated by Paul Auster

Joseph Joubert was born in Montignac (Dordogne) on May 7, 1754, the son of master surgeon Jean Joubert. The second of eight surviving children, Joubert completed his local education at the age of fourteen and was then sent to Toulouse to continue his studies. His father hoped that he would pursue a career in the law, but Joubert's interests lay in philosophy and the classics. After graduation, he taught for several years in the school where he had been a student and then returned to Montignac for two years, without professional plans or any apparent ambitions, already suffering from the weak health that would plague him throughout his life.

In May 1778, just after his twenty-fourth birthday, Joubert moved to Paris, where he took up residence at the Hôtel de Bordeaux on the rue des Francs-Bourgeois. He soon became a member of Diderot's circle and from then until Diderot's death in 1784 he remained very much under the philosopher's influence. It was through Diderot that Joubert met the sculptor Pigalle and many other artists of the period. During those early years in Paris he also met Fontanes, who would remain his most intimate friend for the rest of his life. Fontanes was several years younger than Joubert, but far more ambitious and easily the most brilliant of the young provincial men who had come to make their way in Paris. Both Joubert and Fontanes frequented the literary salon of the countess Fanny de Beauharnais (whose niece later married Bonaparte); other members included Buffon, La Harpe, and Restif de la Bretonne.

In 1785, Fontanes and Joubert attempted to found a newsletter about Paris literary life for English subscribers, but the venture failed. That same year, Joubert entered into a liaison with the wife of Restif de la Bretonne, Agnès Lebègue, a woman fourteen years his senior. But by March of 1786 the affair had ended—painfully for Joubert. Later that year he made his first visit to the town of Villeneuve and met Victoire Moreau, who would become his wife in 1793. During this period Joubert read much and wrote very little. He studied philosophy, music, and painting, but the various writing projects he embarked upon—an appreciation of Pigalle, an essay on the navigator Cook—were never completed. For the most part, it seems, Joubert watched the world around him, cultivated his friendships, meditated. As time went on, he turned more and more to his notebooks as the place to develop his thoughts and explore his inner life. By the late 1780s and early 1790s, they had become a serious daily enterprise for him.

Joubert had long been a supporter of revolutionary views, and when the Revolution came in 1789 he welcomed it enthusiastically. In late 1790, he was named Justice of the Peace in Montignac, a position that entailed great responsibilities and made him the leading citizen of the town. By all accounts, he fulfilled his tasks with vigilance

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and fairness and was widely respected for his work. But he soon became disillusioned with the increasingly violent nature of the Revolution. He declined to stand for re-election in 1792 and gradually withdrew from politics.

After his marriage in 1793 he retired to Villeneuve, from then on dividing his time between the country and Paris. Fontanes had gone into exile in London, where he met Chateaubriand. Eventually, upon their return to Paris, Joubert and the two younger men collaborated on the magazine *Mercure de France.* Joubert would later help Chateaubriand with many passages of *Le Génie du Christianisme* and give him financial help in times of trouble. During the early years of the nineteenth century, Joubert was surrounded by many of the most successful men and women in France. Although he lived very much in their shadows publicly, he was deeply admired for his lucid ideas, his insightful critical mind, and above all for his enormous talent for friendship.

In 1809, Joubert was named inspector general of education, a post he held for about six years. When he died in 1824 at the age of seventy, Chateaubriand, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, eulogized him in the *Journal des débats*: "He was the kind of man you loved for the delicacy of his feelings, the goodness of his soul, the evenness of his temper, the uniqueness of his character, the sharpness and brilliance of his mind—a mind that was interested in everything and understood everything. No one has ever forgotten himself so thoroughly and been so concerned with the welfare of others. . . ."

Although Fontanes and Chateaubriand had both urged Joubert to put together a book drawn from his daily writings, the notebooks remained unpublished during his lifetime. The first selection to appear in print, entitled *Pensées,* was compiled by Chateaubriand in 1838. Exactly one hundred years later, the complete notebooks were published in two volumes by Gallimard (*Les Carnets de Joseph Joubert,* edited by André Beaunier); I have used the Gallimard edition in making my selections.

Excluding his correspondence and the aborted writings of his youth, the nine hundred tightly printed pages of the two Gallimard volumes represent Joubert's entire output as a writer. Joubert was not a writer of maxims in the traditional French manner. He was something far more difficult to define: a writer who spent his whole life preparing himself for a work that never came to be written, a writer of the first order who paradoxically never managed to produce a book. The numerous reflections on writing to be found in the notebooks take their place alongside Joubert's daily preoccupations and are scattered among his observations on the weather, the landscape, family, society, and politics. "These thoughts form the foundation not only of my work, but of my life." —*Paul Auster*

1783

§ It is up to poets to form languages and up to philosophers to reform them. How many words are wrong! And if the accumulation of discoveries each generation must pass on to the next were as vast as it could be, every language would undergo a revolution every hundred years.

§ In France we seem to like the arts more to judge them than to enjoy them.

§ When a nation gives birth to an individual capable of producing a great thought, another is born who is capable of understanding and admiring it.

1784

§ If the earth must perish, then astronomy is our only consolation.

1786

§ Thought forms in the soul in the same way clouds form in the air.

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§ If curiosity had not made us examine the nature of plants, how they take root, how they grow, how they die, how they reproduce . . . we would enjoy their fruits no more fully than animals do, and perhaps with even less pleasure . . .

§ Every sound in music must have an echo; every figure must have a sky in painting; and we who sing with thoughts and paint with words, every sentence and each word in our writings must also have its horizon and its echo.

1787

§ A work of genius, whether poetic or didactic, is too long if it cannot be read in one day.

§ The silence of the fields. How everything hushes imperceptibly with the fall of night. How everything seems to be gathered up: men and animals, by the work of unanimous silence; plants and all things that move, for the wind falls when evening comes near, and the air holds only a single, frail breath. It is from this immobility of all things, and because the remaining light is reflected more during these tranquil hours by the earth and its rocks than by the trees and plants, that the hills and fields seem to lift up the earth and to stand in wonder.

§ The essential thing is not that there be many truths in a work, but that no truth be abused.

1790

§ The ears and eyes are the doors and windows of the soul.

1791

§ Are you listening to the ones who keep quiet?

§ Always to link unknown things to known things.

§ The republic is the only cure for the ills of the monarchy, and the monarchy is the only cure for the ills of the republic.

§ . . . where the accusers are almost always the guilty ones.

§ Through memory we travel against time; through forgetfulness we follow its course.

§ Everything that has wings is beyond the reach of the laws.

§ *Nota.* We must do as much to read an abbreviation as to read a word written in its entirety. This is because it is the mind that reads and not simply the eyes.

§ We are in the world as words are in a book. Each generation is like a line, a phrase.

§ Writing is closer to thinking than to speaking.

1793

§ Wisdom is the strength of the weak.

§ Let heaven forgive the wicked, after they have been punished.

§ In order to live, we need little life. In order to love, we need much.

§ It is necessary that something be sacred.

§ The good is worth more than the best.

§ What makes civil wars more murderous than other wars is that we can more easily accept having a stranger for an enemy than a neighbor; we do not want to keep the possibility of vengeance so near.

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§ Imitate time. It destroys slowly. It eats away, it uses up, it uproots, it detaches and does not rip apart.

§ In their words one hears the tinkling of their brains.

§ We need a ladder to the mind. A ladder and rungs.

1794

§ Here is the desert. In this silence everything speaks to me: and in your noise everything falls silent.

§ The number of books is infinite.

§ Big words. Claim too much attention.

§ Eye—is the sun of the face.

§ The sieve of forgetfulness. Or the riddle of forgetfulness. Or: Memory and forgetfulness are the mother and father of the muses. True knowledge is composed of these two things. Or: It holds a riddle in its hand. This riddle is called forgetfulness.

§ The soul paints itself in our machines.

§ All truths are double or doubled, or they all have a front and a back.

§ They cannot accustom themselves to lacking nothing.

1795

§ These *coups d'états* are necessary, you tell me. I answer you, what is sinister and criminal is never necessary at any time.

§ Imitate the spinner. Imitate the ant. One gathers during the summer what is necessary in winter, and the other prepares in winter what is necessary in summer.

§ Children always want to look behind mirrors.

§ Dreams. Their lantern is magical.

§ Love and fear. Everything the father of a family says must inspire one or the other.

§ Light. It is a fire that does not burn.

§ A tact placed before us and outside us.—An inner tact.

1796

§ The ancients knew about anatomy only through war. It was on the battlefields that they learned all they knew about it.

§ Passions come like a smallpox and disfigure this original beauty.

§ Give me a morality that equally suits the healthy and the sick, men and women, children, adults, and old people.

§ An age in which we have children who can scarcely remember having seen their father.

§ The first part and last part of human life are what is best about it, or at least what is most respectable. The one is the age of innocence, the other is the age of reason. You must write for these two ages and banish from your mind and your books that which does not suit one or the other.

§ I love to see two truths at the same time. Every good comparison gives the mind this advantage.

§ Illusion is in sensations. Error is in judgments. We can know truth and at the same time take pleasure in illusion.

§ One loves to say what he knows, and the other to say what he thinks.

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§ Pleasures are always children, pains always have wrinkles.

§ The imagination is the eye of the soul.

§ There are truths that cannot be apprehended in conversation.

§ What comes through war is given back through war. All spoils will be retaken, all plunder will be dispersed. All victors will be defeated and every city filled with prey will be sacked in its turn.

§ With the telescope, with the microscope, we have seen a greater number of phenomena; and that is all.

§ Plato. He is an author whose ideas cannot be understood until they have become our own.

§ Divorce. Its existence and use should be determined only by the interests of the children.

§ The hordes of words that fill our books proclaim our ignorance, reveal the obscurities that flood our knowledge. If we were perfectly enlightened, our moral books would contain only maxims and our books on physics and spirituality would contain only axioms and facts. Everything else is clutter and shows no more than our gropings, our efforts, and our difficulties.

§ Deism. The human species cannot accommodate itself to it. This doctrine relates to our strengths but not to our weaknesses.

§ Illusion is an integral part of reality. It is an essential presence, in the same way an effect is essential to a cause. (Integral part, which means a part without which a thing does not have the whole integrity of its constitution or application, etc.)

§ When a thought gives birth to obscurity, it must be rejected, renounced, abandoned.

1797

§ A flower that cannot bloom, a bud that cannot open.

§ To seek wisdom rather than truth. It is more within our grasp.

§ The mind can only create errors. Truths are not created, they exist; one can only see them, disentangle them, discover them, and expose them.

§ Lovers. Whoever does not have their weaknesses cannot have their strengths.

§ Clarity of mind is not given in all centuries.

§ We do not write our books in advance, we do them as we write them. What is best about our works is hidden by scaffoldings: our texts are filled with what must be kept and what must be left behind.

§ In metaphysics, the art of writing consists of making sensible and palpable what is abstract. To make abstract what is palpable is its vice and fault. It is the fault of those we have so mistakenly called metaphysicians in this century.

§ What our eyes see, our imagination can no longer see. The same things cannot be the object of both kinds of seeing.

§ For our entire lives we are for moral things what children are for physical things, wanting to join enormously disproportionate things to each other, to adjust big clothes to little bodies and long shoes to little feet.

§ Psalms. Read them with the intention of praying and you will find them beautiful. Eh! Doesn't every reading demand a readiness of mind that is special and appropriate to it?

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§ The imagination has made more discoveries than the eye.

§ When men are imbeciles, the one who is mad dominates the others.

§ God made life to be lived (the world to be inhabited) and not to be known.

§ The thoughts about which we can say: "There is rest in this thought." This image is encouraging.

§ Imprisoned in our body . . . and our soul has its windows.

§ Don't cut what you can untie.

§ Sacred language. It should be hieroglyphical. All words should seem hollowed out or in relief, chiseled or sculpted. Black and white, emptiness and fullness are suitable to it. Everything must be juxtaposed and united, but separated by intervals.

§ The intellectual world is always the same. It is just as easy to know it today as it was in the beginning, and it was just as hidden in the beginning as it is today.

§ "Yes, please cut up the pieces for me," he said, "but don't chew them."

§ Do not say the word that completes the symmetry of your sentence and rounds it off when the reader will inevitably think of it and say it to himself after having read the words that precede it.

§ The weakness of the dying slanders life.

§ *Do not:*—Define what is known: gossip. Obscure what is clear: scribbling. Question what exists: bad faith, ignorance. Make abstract what is palpable: charlatanism. Present difficulties that are not there or are only apparent: deceit.

§ All these philosophers are no more than surgeons.

§ Remember to let your ink grow ripe.

§ Sexes. One has the look of a wound, the other of something skinned.

§ Where do thoughts go? Into the memory of God.

§ Beautiful enclosures please us because they clearly print in us the idea of a portion of space; just as a beautiful harmony makes us feel spontaneously and unconsciously the movement and repose that are the elements of time.

§ God's light goes to the stars and from the stars to us.

§ Delicate minds are all sublimely born minds that have not been able to take flight, because of weak organs, or erratic health, or because lazy habits have held them back.

§ The staircase that leads us to God. What does it matter if it is make-believe, if we really climb it? What difference does it make who builds it, or if it is made of marble or wood, of brick, stone, or mud? The essential thing is that it be solid and that in climbing it we feel the peace that is inaccessible to those who do not climb it.

§ Around every flame there must be a void, so there can be light. Without space, no light.

1798

§ Nothing is perfect on this earth. Even piety is imperfect. Even the piety of saints.

§ Images have had a great influence on realities.

§ What good is modesty?—It makes us seem more beautiful when we are beautiful, and less ugly when we are ugly.

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§ The sign then makes us forget the thing signified.

§ Beauties that leave nothing to the imagination.

§ The truth. They make it consist of nothing they cannot prove. The greatest happiness they find in it is being able to put forward incontestable assertions. This is what they like, and they consider it a sign of prestige, a prerogative, a power, a dignity, etc., a liberation from error.

§ Nothing in the moral world is lost, just as nothing in the material world is annihilated. All our feelings and thoughts on this earth are only the beginning of feelings and thoughts that will be completed elsewhere.

§ The only good in man is his young feelings and his old thoughts.

§ Stars more beautiful to the eye than to the telescope that robs them of their illusions.

§ Music, perspective, architecture, etc. Embroider time, embroider space.

§ A century in which the body has become subtle, in which the mind has become coarse.

§ To live without sky . . .

§ To reason, to argue. It is to walk with crutches in search of the truth. We come to it with a leap. We must use reasoning to make sure we have reached the end and that we have covered the whole path. Likewise in the stadium, the runner touches the stone with his hands and steps back to see the barrier in front of the goal.

These false rules only serve to persuade those who observe them that they have attained what they cannot attain.

We have led our minds astray . . .

§ To much talk (they say). *Nota bene:* too much writing.

§ To be in one's place, to be at one's post, to be part of the order, to be content. Not to murmur of suffering, to be incapable of being unhappy.

§ It is impossible to love the same person twice.

§ To think what we do not feel is to lie to ourselves, in the same way that we lie to others when we say what we do not think. Everything we think must be thought with our entire being, body, and soul.

§ Desire to be a bird, desire to become a bee. Man feels that his happiness is in the air.—And if we wish to become a bird, it is not an eagle, a vulture, a pheasant, a partridge, or a parrot that we wish to become, but a modest little bird gifted with amiability, a warbler, a titmouse, a robin, a nightingale, an average and innocent bird. For neither do we wish to become a hummingbird.

§ Always to explain the moral world by the physical world is not necessarily a good idea. For in the physical world we often take appearances for realities and our conjectures for facts. We thus risk making two errors instead of one by applying to one world the false dimensions we give to the other. Applications of the moral world to the political world are more appropriate.

§ The style is the thought itself.

§ How, when languages are formed, ease of expression is harmful to the mind, for no obstacle thwarts it, contains it, makes it cautious, or forces it to choose among its thoughts, a choice it is forced to make in languages that are still new, by the delay that requires it to look for its words and to search through its memory. In this case one can write only with great attention.

§ J.-J. Rousseau. In his books we learn how to be discontented with everything outside of ourselves.

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§ Passions. The ancients called them *troubles*; and rightly so: why.

§ Memory.—It is a mirror that retains, and retains forever. Nothing is lost in it, nothing is erased. But it can be tarnished. And then one sees nothing in it.

§ Newton. It is no more true that he has discovered the system of the world than it is true that someone who balances the accounts of an administration has discovered a system of government.

§ Beautiful clothes are a sign of joy.

1799

§ Illusion or play. Everything agreeable is in them.

§ The marriage of the soul and the body . . . Their agreement is delicious, but their disputes are cruel.

§ Passions are only natural. It is the lack of repentance that corrupts.

§ How it happens that only in looking for words do we find thoughts.

§ When you want transparency, the finite, the smooth, and the beautiful, you must polish for a long time.

§ What is so finished, so exact in its expression and, in a word, so perfect, has a kind of form so determined and solid that the imagination of the reader has nothing to do and nothing to react to and therefore does not open its memory to appropriate it and retain it. We leave this memory before ourselves, to admire it, but outside of us. We are struck and not penetrated. There is nothing fluid or pithy about it, except perhaps that the thought in itself is so ethereal that it dematerializes the word.

§ Clocks must regulate watches, just as laws must regulate particular actions. But the sun must regulate the clocks and justice must regulate the laws.

§ We use for passions the stuff that has been given to us for happiness.

§ Lions, bulls; images of strength are everywhere, whereas images of wisdom are nowhere.

§ Art is another nature that men have made. I call it nature because it has always been present; wherever there are men, they paint, they sing, they build.

§ We must treat our lives as we treat our writings, put them in accord, give harmony to the middle, the end, and the beginning. In order to do this we must make many erasures.

§ Strong and concise style. This must be the end, not the beginning. Refine what is subtle, change the solid into fluid, and the fluid into smoke: stop with the vapor, the cloud, etc.

§ Few men, in these great political dramas, are capable of inventing a role, many are capable of playing it.

§ Plato is the Rabelais of abstractions.

§ Don't throw your mind into flowing waters.

1800

§ Uproot? No, but transplant.

§ The ancients extolled music because (they said) it suppressed passions (at least earthly ones). We praise it because it gives them.

§ Each man thinks not what he has been told but what he understands.

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§ Antiquity. I prefer ruins to reconstructions.

§ It would be difficult to be scorned and to live virtuously. We have need of support.

§ Children. Need models more than critics.

§ All ardent people have something mad about them, and all cold people have something stupid.

§ Everything is a game except what makes the soul better or worse.

§ There are truths that instruct, perhaps, but they do not illuminate. In this class are all the truths of reasoning.

§ We are worth more when someone looks at us. And, because of this, an eye is always watching us.

§ On Berkeley. To say there are figures without bodies is to pretend there are embroideries without material.

§ Music.—Singing demands another use of the throat and has a different voice character from that of speaking.

Singing is not just fitting words and noises together with a certain exactitude and precision. Singing presents our ears with a voice and accents that move the imagination.

Those who sing well have an echo in their throat and an unidentifiable softness. Those who sing in the way they speak do not sing, but they speak in cadence. Song must be to speech what verse is to prose.

§ Let us not confuse what is merely intelligible, that is to say, easily understood, with what is clear.

§ The poet must not cross an interval with a step when he can cross it with a leap.

§ Repentance consumes.—And what does it consume?—It consumes the faults and the tendency that caused them.

§ Ideas never lack for words. It is words that lack ideas. As soon as the idea has come to its last degree of perfection, the word blossoms; or, if you like, it blossoms from the word that presents it and clothes it.

§ It is very difficult to be wise (through the mind); it is not difficult to be wise occasionally and by chance, but it is difficult to be wise assiduously and by choice.

§ Everyone makes and has need of making a world other than the one he sees.

§ Leibnitz and Spinoza.—The realm of abstraction. The first offers its perfection, the second nothing but its flaws.

§ To analyze, to deconstruct.—What they so emphatically call analysis is what we would call division when speaking simply.

The subject must be analyzed in terms of itself, that is, it must be considered from all sides and examined part by part, turned and turned again. Everything must be said concisely and simultaneously after having been examined repeatedly and at length. The writer must be like a painter. The painter considers his model trait by trait, but it is the whole that he shows. It is not ray by ray, but through facets, that the light shines for us.

§ If prayer does not change our destiny, it changes our feelings—which is no less useful.

§ Every house: temple, empire, school.

1801

§ History, like perspective, has need of distance.

§ Objects must be described only in order to describe the feelings they evoke in us.

§ A thought is a thing as real as a cannon ball.

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§ In those days they took allusions from the world and today we are forced to take them from books. This is a disadvantage.

§ I like Leibnitz's expression *the soul carries the body*. And observe that everywhere and in everything, what is subtle carries what is compact; and what is light holds in suspension all that is heavy. Admit it, at least in the sense of —— and as the most beautiful conception of the human mind.

§ No, I am not angry with myself, but I am angry with books.

§ Beautiful works. Genius begins them, but labor alone finishes them.

§ Banish from words everything equivocal, everything indeterminate; make them, as they say, into invariable numbers: if there is no more play in the word, from then on there is no more eloquence or poetry; all that is mobile and variable in the soul's affections would remain without possible expression. But what did I say, banish . . . I say more. If you banished all abuse from words, there would not even be any axioms. (Vid. d'Alembert, Discourse on the Encyclopedia.) It is the equivocality, the uncertainty, that is to say, the suppleness of words that is one of their great advantages for creating an exact usage.

§ Faculty of inventing languages—is an industry natural to our intelligence.

1802

§ Floods of passions. It would nevertheless be better to raise the dikes for them.

§ What will you think of pleasures when you no longer enjoy them?

§ The revolution chased my mind from the real world by making the world too horrible for me.

§ Scrupulous taste. Scrupulous people rarely do great things.

§ In morality (a science of practice and circumstances) the individual is made for society. But in metaphysics (and even in religion), a science of real essences, society is made for individuals.

§ It is even easier to be wrong about truth than about beauty.

§ In order for a style to be considered good, it must, so to speak, detach itself from the paper, in the same way that the colors and figures detach themselves from a good painting.

§ Men do not want to learn unfashionable truths except when they are spared the pains of attention.

§ Metaphysics. A vast science in which everything is true, even what is contradictory, as in a vast countryside the same towers are both round and square.

§ There are only two kinds of beautiful writing, that which has a great fullness of sound, meaning, soul, warmth, and life, and that which has a great transparency.

§ Imagining is good, provided you do not believe you see what can only be imagined.

§ Sensibility that comes from the nerves. Opinions have a great influence on it and can lead to cruelty. Examples in the revolution.

§ There are many situations in life that we suddenly feel we have seen in dreams.

§ All beautiful words are susceptible to more than one meaning (or signification).

§ Every excess is a mistake.

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1803

§ Everything is made through images. They enter us through all the other senses, as through the eye. An echo (they say) is an image of the voice. All our affections are produced by images of touching. Our whole body is a mirror.

§ Pleasures that we can perceive only when they no longer give us pleasure.

§ Someone said of an asthmatic who was being very sweet and patient in his suffering: "One would like to breathe for him."

§ Disagreeable shortcuts of style.

§ The same feature that is agreeable when it is fleeting becomes hideous when it remains fixed. That is because mobility is the essence of what is agreeable.

§ The thoughts that come to us are worth more than the ones we seek.

§ Chateaubriand. We inhabit the same regions but we do not bring the same curiosities.

§ I have many forms for ideas, but not enough forms for phrases.

§ What we write with difficulty is written with more care, engraves itself more deeply.

§ All nightingales do not sing equally well, nor do all roses smell the same.

§ It is difficult for me to leave Paris because I must separate myself from my friends; and difficult for me to leave the country because I must separate myself from myself.

§ To write, not only with few words, but with few thoughts.

§ Two sorts of truths: I. what must be thought, II. what must be done.

§ For an expression to be beautiful it must say more than is necessary while nevertheless saying precisely what it must. The *too much* and the *enough* must be united, there must be abundance and economy. The narrow and the wide, the little and the much, must be mingled. The sound must be brief and the meaning infinite. Example: *discentem credere opportet* (Aristot.). Everything luminous has this character. A lamp and its wick perfectly brighten not only the object for which they are used but twenty others for which one did not think of using them.

§ The voice is an aid to intelligence.

§ Of certain beauties, certain thoughts, certain feelings, certain imaginative traits that are absolutely new. No one was expecting them. Their novelty makes people indecisive. We are afraid to hazard our judgment, to compromise the honor of our opinion. We decide to approve of these things late. We dare not taste them; we want proofs to be provided first. We are completely surprised that these things continue to charm us long after we have seen them for the first time.

1804

§ To survive one's passions and not one's strengths. Happy.

§ Those useless phrases that come into the head. The mind is grinding its colors.

§ When the author speaks to himself instead of speaking to the reader.

§ Everything that is exact is short.

§ The body. Like a piece of clothing that wears out.

§ There is nothing serious in civil life except good and evil, vice and virtue. Everything else in it should be a game.

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§ When you write easily, you always think you have more talent than you really do.

§ In the same way crimes have increased laws, errors have increased explanations.

§ Of those who remember their childhood and those who only remember school.

1805

§ Those thoughts that come to us suddenly and that are not detached from the others and that please when isolated as sounds.

§ Glory. Lovelier to desire than to possess.

§ All things that are easy to say have already been perfectly said.

§ I call imagination the faculty of making palpable all that belongs to the mind, of incorporating what is spirit, and, in a word, of unveiling what is invisible to itself without robbing it of its nature.

§ "The art is in hiding art." Yes, in everything that should resemble nature. But isn't there anything that should resemble art and therefore show itself?

§ All these young minds the revolution has heated up and brought to flower before their time, before their age.

§ To judge things of taste, we must give ourselves time to taste them.

§ An oratorical style often has the same drawbacks as those operas in which the music prevents you from hearing the words. Here the words prevent you from seeing the thoughts.

§ It is not simply a matter of distinguishing between good and evil, but also of not confusing what is laughable with what is not. To make laughable what is not is in some way to make bad what was good.

§ To see the world means judging the judges.

§ We are afraid of having and showing a small mind and we are not afraid of having and showing a small heart.

§ In every kind of debauch there enters much coldness of soul. It is a conscious and voluntary abuse of pleasure.

§ In everything mathematical there is something imperishable, because there is nothing living.

§ What man knows only through feeling can be explained only through enthusiasm.

1806

§ I don't like to write anything down on paper that I would not say to myself.

§ The important business of man is life, and the important business of life is death.

§ All those for whom style is not a game but a labor.

§ Facility is the enemy of great things.

§ Metaphysics. At least the mind finds space in it. Elsewhere it finds only fullness.

§ One always adds a little of one's soul to what one thinks.

§ All gardeners live in beautiful places because they make them so.

1808

§ Wicked people have nothing human about them except passions: they are almost their virtues.

§ —maxims, because what is isolated can be seen better.

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§ To be tragic, misfortunes must be rare.

§ In fact, goodness undoubtedly makes us better than morality.

§ Dry, not like wood, but like bread. That is to say, dry, but nourishing, dry but not hard, not arid.

§ Necessity can make a doubtful action innocent, but it cannot make it commendable.

§ —and the pernicious habit of accepting pleasures without gratitude.

§ The breath of the mind is attention.

§ The paper is patient, but the reader is not.

§ Animals love the people who talk to them.

§ The republic of ants and the monarchy of bees.

§ If we exclude the idea of God, it is impossible to have an exact idea of virtue.

§ The great inconvenience of new books is that they prevent us from reading old books.

§ Voltaire had the soul of a monkey and the mind of an angel.

§ Freedom. The freedom to do something well. There is no need of any other kind.

Truths. The truths that teach us to act well and to live well. There is no need of any other kind.

§ Abuse of words, foundation of ideology.

§ Everything we can measure seems small.

§ The century felt it was making progress by falling into the precipice.

§ Mme de Sévigné said that "the pen always has a great part in what we write." And language in what we say.

§ Tenderness is the repose of passion.

1809

§ A work is perfectly finished only when nothing can be added to it and nothing taken away.

§ There is a degree of bad health that makes us happy.

§ We always lose the friendship of those who lose our esteem.

§ Because in fact reason leads man back to his instincts.

§ Everything that becomes a duty should become dear.

§ There is an infinity of things that one does well only through necessity.

1810

§ Anger, which purges resentment.

1811

§ The bad must be changed into the good, the incomplete must be finished, and what is twisted must be straightened.

§ Credulity forges more miracles than trickery could invent.

§ Nothing corrects a badly made mind. A sad and irritating truth that we learn late and after so many wasted efforts!

1812

§ In this painting of our life given to us by our memories, everything is moving and depends on our point of view.

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§ For the soul the mind is a sort of organ, a sort of eye, of language, of hearing, and even a brain, a sort of megaphone, of telescope, of compass. And sometimes this organ acts all on its own.

§ The ideas of eternity and space have something divine about them, but not those of pure duration and simple extension.

§ When I had the strength, I did not have the patience. I have the patience today and I no longer have the power.

§ The child must live with the world before living with society; and he must love his parents before loving his teachers and comrades.

§ These beautiful words of Chateaubriand: "This is moderation . . . without which everything is a lie."

§ Fortunately, when he lacks reasons he also lacks words.

§ Poetry made with little matter: with leaves, with grains of sand, with air, with nothings, etc.

§ Of those who have a muse and those who have only their soul.

1813

§ There are words agreeable to the eye (in the same way there are words agreeable to the ear). By a fortunate combination of the letters that form them or by the harmony of these letters. For each letter has its shape.

§ Silence.—Joys of silence.—Thoughts must be born from the soul and words from silence.—An attentive silence.

§ "Leave behind endless hope and vast thoughts," says the poet. I no longer have vast thoughts.

§ In political institutions, almost everything we call an abuse was once a remedy.

§ What is clear should not be drawn out too much. These useless explanations, these endless examinations are a kind of long whiteness and lead to boredom. It is the uniformity of a wall, of a long piece of laundry.

§ In order to know men, something must be chanced. Who risks nothing of himself knows nothing.

1814

§ Nothing is better than a justified enthusiasm.

§ What leads us astray in morality is an excessive love of pleasure; and what stops us or holds us back in metaphysics is a love of certainty.

§ Our thoughts are sometimes an image of the world, sometimes a product of our mind, and sometimes the result or fabrication of our excited will. When they are an image of the world, they paint the truth. If they are the simple product of our mind, they represent our mind and paint something else as well. But if they are the result or fabrication of our will alone, they paint nothing true, nothing that can give pleasure. They are bizarre traits, writer's caprices, mere pen scratchings . . .

§ In painting, the pure idea. In sculpture, a real base clothed by an idea. In painting, shadow and idea; in sculpture, idea with a body, the idea incorporated and not simply represented. In sculpture, the expressed idea is all on the surface; in painting, it must be within. Beauty is hollowed out in painting; in sculpture it is in relief.

§ —like those birds that never perch on anything but the peaks of the highest trees, on the tips of shrubs.

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§ The end of life is bitter.

§ Almost all men prefer danger to fear. Some prefer death to danger and to pain. This is because fear, danger, and pain disturb reason. The horse throws himself into the precipice to escape the spur.

§ There is in each man a divine part that is born with him, and a human and even animal part that grows with time. The first must be conserved and carefully cultivated within ourselves, the other thrives without help.

§ In literature, beauty must not be fabricated.

§ The gleam of the diamond in the pearls of the dew.

§ Neither in the arts, nor in logic, nor in life should an idea in any way be treated as a thing.

§ To put the soul into physics and the body into metaphysics, if we want the first to be true and the second to be believable. For in the physical world everything happens from such subtle causes and in the metaphysical world everything that happens should be similar to what we see, etc. . . .

Remember that God gave us the power to imagine what our nature has not given us the possibility of seeing.

§ Sonorous prose. Is this an advantage or a drawback?

1817

§ Melancholy: when we have sorrows without a name.

1819

§ Because they know all the words, they think they know all the truths.

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Reviewing and being reviewed

by Joseph Epstein

Book reviews are among those things people who write books despise but find it difficult to live without. Edmund Wilson, in his essay "The Literary Worker's Polonius," noted: "For an author, the reading of his reviews, whether favorable or unfavorable, is one of the most disappointing experiences in life." Yet in *Upstate,* a collection of journal entries from his last years, Wilson remarked that "getting older, for a writer, did not necessarily give you self-confidence. . . . I sometimes got up at four o'clock in the morning to read old reviews of my books." The worst of writing, as more than one writer has written, is that one depends so much on the opinions of others.

Allow me to take up Wilson's first point, about reviews being one of the most disappointing experiences of an author's life, by way of personal example. One day, upon returning home from a business lunch, I found an enticing package waiting. It was from Jonathan Cape, Ltd., the English publisher of a book I had recently written; the package contained *all* the English reviews of my book. There must have been twenty of them. Some were from the English weeklies, some from the London, some from the provincial press. I no longer have copies of these reviews, but many, I seem to recall, were written by people named Ian or Jeremy; the one from the *Manchester Guardian,* I do recall, was written by someone with the lilting name of Monica Furlong.

Well, thought I, here's a splendid little snack for the ego; some twenty reviews of a book of mine, and written by men and women who, so far as I knew, brought no parti pris to their comments. So, like a fat gourmand who had travelled far for his meal, I sat down and began to plow into these reviews. "Let down" does not begin to describe my feelings as I read my way through the first six or seven of them. Some praised my book, some attacked it. But, in praise or in attack, there was a dreary sameness to the reviews that left me a little depressed. Reading the remaining thirteen or fourteen reviews suddenly seemed in the nature of a chore. They were so low-grade; they had no intellectual precision, no originality of thought or even of phrasing. And whether the reviewers liked my book or hated it they failed to convince me of anything, because they were merely tossing off opinions, and the thing about opinions is that, except for those that are meant to be scandalous, one really is as good as another. "Epstein is very sensitive in his treatment of women," one reviewer might write, only to be followed by another: "Epstein is quite insensitive to the condition of women." "Epstein is not your typical modern intellectual." "Your typical modern intellectual, Epstein . . ." "Wisely, Epstein does not crowd his pages with statistical matter." "His case would have been much more persuasive had Epstein provided more statistical evidence." And so it went. What, finally, did it all prove? Nothing more than that, for

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reasons best known to themselves, Ian thought well of my book and Jeremy didn't.

I have never kept count, but my guess is that I have had roughly three hundred reviews bestowed on books I have written. From these three hundred or so reviews I have learned nothing, either about my books or about my quality as a writer. Of all these reviews, one pleased me, and for the following reasons: it understood the intention of my book exactly, it was elegantly phrased, and it was written by a writer whose work I myself admired and whose views I could not predict. For the rest, reviews of my books have been mostly muddle, politics by other means, and unintended comedy. I have seen my books used to work out personal problems, even scores, release resentments. Stendhal once said that to write a book was to risk standing up to be shot in public. But he never mentioned the embarrassing places where you might be hit.

Worst of all can be the praising reviews. To have your book praised for things you yourself despise, virtues you have no wish to claim, ideas that are as far as possible from your own—all this can induce real discomfort, like a letter citing you for strength of character from, say, Spiro Agnew or Ted Kennedy. Sometimes the praise, because of its ineptitude, only makes you all the more dubious. "Personally insightful," a review from *Newsweek* called one of my books: "Linguistically dopeful," I reply. "Joseph Epstein is an excellent companion on a thinking trip," someone in *The New York Times Book Review* noted of the same book, making me wonder what an unthinking trip might be. In the *Washington Post* I once had my prose compared to a fine Chinese meal. What, I wondered, could this mean? An hour after reading me you're looking for something else to read?

But the praising review that sticks in my mind—and in my craw—is that of a book of my essays that began by stating that the essay was a splendid and endlessly flexible form. Among its practitioners, the reviewer claimed, have been Montaigne and Pascal, Hazlitt and Lamb, Camus and Orwell, and, yes, in our own time, the brilliant John Leonard. Joseph Epstein as an essayist, the reviewer continued, is of their company. Now of all contemporary writers I disesteem John Leonard easily heads the list. I do not want to be of his company. Indeed, at the very mention of the name John Leonard it seemed that Montaigne threw his manteau across his shoulders and left the room, followed by Pascal delicately lifting the skirts of his vestments; Hazlitt said he had a previous appointment at the fives courts, Lamb muttered something about his sister not being well, Orwell stubbed out his cigarette, Camus buckled the belt on his trenchcoat, and they were all gone, and so was any sense of pleasure I might have taken in the praise the rest of this review lavished on my book.

Being frequently reviewed might seem to some people to fall in the category of what is known as happy problems. To be ignorantly reviewed is, doubtless, better than being ignored altogether. Many a writer of lofty reputation has found neglect to be the last circle in literary hell. "*The Common Reader* came out 8 days ago and so far not a single review has appeared," Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary for May 1, 1925, "and nobody has written to me or spoken to me about it, or in any way acknowledged the fact of its existence; save Maynard, Lydia, and Duncan. Clive is conspicuously dumb; Mortimer has flu and can't review it; Nancy saw him reading it, but reported no opinion; all signs which point to a dull chill depressing reception; and complete failure."

Some writers claim not to be in the least affected by bad or stupid reviews. Arnold Bennett said he never read his reviews—he only measured them. Not so John O'Hara. O'Hara cut his profitable connection with *The New Yorker* when a mean review of one of his books by Brendan Gill appeared in its pages. O'Hara arranged to have his books published on Thanksgiving Day because he knew that that was a day on which Orville Prescott did not publish reviews in *The New York Times*. And it was always a point of pride to him, who had been attacked by so

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many writers in the intellectual quarterlies, to have had Lionel Trilling write admiringly about him.

I like to think myself above such petty passions. Unfortunately, I am not, and my guess is that few writers are, at any rate completely. In an otherwise fast fading memory, I seem to retain the names of most of the men and women who have reviewed my books roughly. Upon my reading a rough review, my first impulse is to write a sulphuric little note to the reviewer, reviewing his review: "Mon cher M. le Twerp, Sorry you did not find my book to your taste, if taste be the correct word to apply to views as coarse as those you displayed in your review. Still, I wonder if, in your crude fury, you didn't forget something—such as telling your readers what my book was about. But then I suppose, even in the hands of a real craftsman like yourself, a book review cannot be expected to do everything." I soon calm down and decide to save the postage. At such times it helps to recall Mencken's dictum: it is not injustice but justice that hurts.

Of course the best reviews are not reviews at all but the carefully considered criticisms and, one hopes, appreciations of those men and women whose literary intelligence one truly respects—one's peers, in the old and fine sense of the word. After that, the best criticism often comes through the mails, in letters from strangers who are not themselves writers but who read books in the passionate, heartfelt way of people who yearn to learn and are not weighed down by prepackaged opinions. You can sometimes learn a thing or two from these letters. One woman wrote to me to say, of a collection of familiar essays I had published, that they may have been familiar but they weren't very personal, which seems to me a subtle and useful criticism.

Yet the reviews that can control a book's fate are those that appear in print. And book reviews are today more important than ever before. Under the current dispensation, a trade book has a bookstore shelf life of roughly ninety days. As Sybille Bedford not long ago put it, publishing nowadays is all serve and volley, and an author has to get to net quickly. Fifteen years ago a book might have remained in a bookstore for eighteen months or two years; even an ignorantly reviewed good book had a chance to find its readership by word of mouth. No longer. Word of mouth does not travel as fast as word of computer. A few well-placed stupid reviews can go a long way toward killing an excellent book, even causing its early banishment from bookstores, preventing it from reincarnation in a paperback edition, snuffing out its existence—and its author's hopes—quickly and effectively.

The books of already well-known and commercially successful writers are less vulnerable to the vagaries of reviewing than are those of young writers and writers belonging to the category known as "middle authors": in the middle between trade and scholarly in their work, in the middle between selling well and selling poorly. For the well-known and commercially successful writer the big financial decisions about print-run, advertising budget, and paperback sale have generally been made before reviewers have had a go at his book. When his book is being reviewed only his ego is on the line. But reviews for the young or middle author can be decisive. It is not uncommon for a publisher to print a small pressrun of such a writer's book, awaiting the response—by which is meant the reviews or the interest shown in the book by various television and radio talk-shows—before deciding to print the book in substantial numbers.

Perhaps I ought to make a distinction between good reviews and reviews that sell books. The best book reviews are only rarely what the publishers can call "sell reviews." Sell reviews tend to be blurby: "Don't exhale till you have read this." Good reviews can sell books, yet sell reviews are not usually good. Sell reviews are a part of advertising, and it is always a bit embarrassing witnessing a good writer setting out to write one. Even Edmund Wilson was not above this sort of thing. It is sad to read his review

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of Svetlana Alliluyeva's *Only One Year,* for instance, which will take its place, Wilson tells us, "among the great Russian autobiographical works: Herzen, Kropotkin, Tolstoy's *Confession.*" I don't know why Wilson wanted to give a push to the feeble literary effort of Stalin's daughter, but push, clearly, he did, for the line I have quoted is, along with not being true, sheer *blurbissimo.*

What is a good book review? A first blush answer is, I suppose, the product of an interesting mind thinking about a book. But there is more to it than that. A reviewer has certain obligations to the book he's reviewing and to his own readers: he must report what the book is saying; he must make a judgment about how well the author gets it said; and he must determine if what has been said was worth saying in the first place. Not to be dull, not to be fearful, not to scamp the duties of clear summary—these are the minimum requirements that a good book reviewer must meet.

Yet another quality ought to be part of his temperamental equipment, and this is a controlled anger aroused by breaches in literary justice. When bad writers are praised or good writers neglected or ill-understood, he should feel personally offended. His pique, though, ought to be more than personal. Judging books correctly is of the utmost seriousness to him; misjudging a novel is of no less consequence than, say, misjudging a friendship.

Not all good reviewers have had this anger, of course, although most have. H. L. Mencken could scarcely function without it. V. S. Pritchett, on the other hand, seems scarcely to have had any anger at all in his long career, and even today he puts his best energies into making careful literary discriminations, not berating authors. Still, if it doesn't offend you that American literary academics are able to publish structuralist studies of John Irving, then you probably ought to be in another line of work.

Along with possessing at least a modicum of anger, a good book reviewer ought not to show too much generosity. While always hopeful of discovering real talent—both for the new and the different and for work of a traditional kind—and ready to encourage it with measured praise, the book reviewer must at the same time always be skeptical. Dubiety ought to be his normal condition. Books, unlike criminals, are best judged guilty until proven innocent—for innocent, in this context, read without falsity, fudging, or flagrant flaw. Most current-day reviewers err on the side of generosity—doubtless they want to seem friends to literature—and so literary masterpieces are announced more frequently than station-breaks. Generosity, like humility, can be carried too far. Jonathan Yardley, Doris Grumbach, Robert Coles, and Robert Towers are four people who review too generously. Their liking a book carries no weight—they like so many.

Anyone of any literary maturity knows that, even in a population of roughly two-hundred-and-forty million people, rare is the year in which more than fifteen to twenty truly first-class books are published. By good books I mean books that have a chance of being read with profit ten years or so after the time of their original publication, the qualification that Cyril Connolly, in *Enemies of Promise,* set up for a book of the kind he would have liked to have written but felt he had failed to write. Of course, there are interesting bad books, and interesting failed books, and books that have been wildly acclaimed and need to be shot down. There are older books that are usefully re-evaluated in the light of a later day and books that have been unfairly neglected. In sum, there is no shortage of reviewing work to be done.

Where the shortage exists is in the number of competent workers to do it. Has it ever been thus? Quite possibly it has. In 1914, in a brief essay entitled "Reviewing: An Unskilled Labour," Edward Thomas referred to the majority of reviewers as "a rabble of ridiculous and unlovely muddlers." In the same essay he divided book reviews into four kinds: "the interesting and good; the interesting but bad; the uninteresting but good; the uninteresting and bad." And,

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Thomas noted, "most are of the last kind." Raymond Chandler, writing to his English publisher Hamish Hamilton in 1949, is scarcely cheerier on the subject of reviewing: "There are far, far too many novelists reviewing other novelists. There is far too much consideration for books that are obviously going to get nowhere, and far too little understanding of what it is in books that make people read them. And there is a tight group of critics or reviewers who are monotonously willing to say something nice about almost any book at all." Recall, please, that both Thomas and Chandler were writing not about America, where complaints about the thinness of culture have long been commonplace, but about England, where traditions of intellectual journalism have run deeper than they have run here.

Part of the reason for the paucity of able reviewers, now as in the past, has to do with the difficulties and disadvantages inherent in the form of the book review itself. To begin with, it has never been quite clear what the purposes of a book review are. Should a review grade the author, passing out complaints and criticism along the way? Should it chiefly perform a service for readers, informing them whether the book under review is or is not a waste of their time? Or should it combine both tasks, an aid to both writers and readers? And there is the question of whether a book reviewer can do these things while still being mildly entertaining. Book-review readers and book-review editors are not noted for desiring their edification straight.

Then, too, in the view of the world there is something slightly second-class about book reviewing, this despite the fact that many of the great essays of the nineteenth century, including those of Macaulay and Sainte-Beuve, began as book reviews. Cyril Connolly and Edmund Wilson were two of the best book reviewers to have written in English in our own century, yet neither of them, I suspect, would very much have liked to think himself a book reviewer chiefly, even though, if you laid out their writing by the yard, the amount of prose they expended on book reviews in their careers would be city blocks longer than that of any other form they worked in. But then reviewers one approves of are not known as reviewers but as critics. Something of the odor of Grub Street still clings to the activity of book reviewing; something of the foul reputation of hackwork, however undeserved it may be.

A critic is assumed to be deeper than a reviewer, but one of the significant differences in the working conditions of the two is that the critic usually has more space available to him to work out his ideas, and more time to think them through. Unlike the reviewer, he does not work under deadline pressure. Edmund Wilson cited H. L. Mencken and Van Wyck Brooks as "reviewer critics," noting: "These are extremely rare. Most people who are capable of first-rate criticism do not want to interrupt their other work for jobs as unremunerative as book reviews." And the critic who is able to write a competent review is rare as well. It is difficult to imagine, say, R. P. Blackmur writing well—or even intelligibly—at fifteen hundred words. Or Yvor Winters or F. R. Leavis. On the other hand, reading a regular reviewer like Christopher Lehmann-Haupt at six thousand words feels less like reading an essay than suffering punishment for a crime.

Space is almost always a serious limitation. As someone who still does a certain amount of book reviewing, I know I have decided against taking on at least three assignments in recent months because the length at which I would be allowed to write seemed inhibiting. One request was to review, for the magazine *New York,* John Kenneth Galbraith's autobiography; nine hundred words were wanted. Another was to review the most recent edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary* for *The New York Times Book Review* at, roughly, fifteen hundred words. The third was to review *A Margin of Hope,* Irving Howe's autobiography, for *The Chicago Tribune* at nine hundred words. I chose not to do the Galbraith because I felt disposed to attack him, and thought that if I were to do so effectively I

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needed more space to lay out such artillery, armor, and troops as I possess. *The American Heritage Dictionary* I felt best written about at essay length. As for Irving Howe, about his career I have rather complicated feelings that I didn't think I could sort out in under a thousand words. (The *Chicago Tribune* was probably not the best place to sort them out in anyway. I could already see the *Tribune*'s newspaper-like headline over the review—"Jewish Critic Sees Hope"—which was in itself a discouragement.)

If too little space is often discouraging to reviewers, too much space is quite as often discouraging to readers. And not merely to newspaper readers. Once *The New York Review of Books* got underway in earnest, one of the first complaints one heard from many of its readers was about its reviewers going on at what was felt to be monstrous length. John Gross, while editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement,* used to send me books to review without ever specifying any length. I was, apparently, to write about the book at the length I thought suitable, which in my case meant my turning a review into an essay of four or five thousand words. I was delighted, of course, but I'm not sure I can say the same for the readers of the TLS.

Who reviews? Apart from those professionals who review books full-time for weekly magazines and for the few American daily newspapers that are large enough to employ book-reviewers regularly, the people who review books in the United States tend to be academics, novelists, and poets who need a bit of extra money, people with bookish interests who for one reason or another work at non-bookish jobs, and the young who wish somehow to break into the literary life and find doing so through reviewing easier than other ways. Professional reviewers are few in number, and Paul Theroux, writing last year in *Harper's,* thought this an unfortunate thing. Theroux wrote:

> Most of all, university patronage has spelled the decline of book reviewing in the United States. After the foundations delivered novelists into the arms of the universities, there was no need for anyone to engage in the habitual tasks associated with the profession of letters. A campus of creative writers does not mean that the local newspaper will be lively with literary journalism; it means its opposite. Book reviewing, the literary essay, the feuilleton—all of these went out the window when university patronage came in the door; and a sharp, and I think, unfair, distinction came to be drawn between the literary man and the literary journalist.

I rather doubt it. The decline of reviewing cannot, I think, be blamed on the university. It was not, after all, very good before. Dwight Macdonald years ago used to call Charles Poore and Orville Prescott, the regular daily reviewers of *The New York Times,* "the lead-dust twins." Francis Brown, when editor of *The New York Times Book Review,* used to prefer what he called "up" reviews—"up" standing for "upbeat," for which read positive, pro, sell reviews. If anyone can remember a time when the *Saturday Review* ran good book reviews he must be in his eighties at least.

Good reviews do get written, but most book reviewing in this country is mediocre, and quite possibly always will be. The people who do reviewing do it as a bit of work peripheral to work that is more truly at the center of their lives. Reviewing doesn't pay very much, and most book reviewers tend to give dollar value—that is to say, not very much. A review that is properly done—with the reviewer reading all the other books of the author under review, looking into connected works on the same subject, and taking serious pains in composing his prose—will probably earn a reviewer well under the minimum wage. As a motive for reviewing, money isn't a very good one.

But when one begins to talk about motives for reviewing one enters very tricky terrain indeed. In classifying book reviewers, Edmund Wilson mentioned "people who want to write about something else." As a subsection of this category, I would add people who want to write but don't other-

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wise have anything in particular to write about. When I think back to my own early days as a reviewer, my chief motive for reviewing was writing itself and—no small thing—appearing in print. I looked for books to review that I thought I might be able to say something interesting about. With a brashness that now rather impresses me, I accepted all books that were offered to me for review whether I knew anything about the subject or not. If I didn't know anything about a subject, I would read up on it before sitting down to write the review. One week I might find myself reviewing the memoirs of Alexander Herzen, another week the collected writings of Santayana, a month or so later the autobiography of Bertrand Russell or a biography of Frank Lloyd Wright. This, I believe, is what is known as getting one's education in public, and this, through book reviewing, is what I did.

The advantage of book reviewing for the young is that it gives them something to write about. I know it did me. I would not go so far as to say that any of the reviews I wrote in my twenties were of intellectual interest, but I always took great care with their composition, and so at least produced highly burnished clichés. Thus I admired Bertrand Russell's idealism, Santayana's exquisiteness, Frank Lloyd Wright's radicalism. None of this was exactly front page news; still, I got away with it, for the editors of the journals I reviewed for believed in these clichés, too. I was reminded of my own youthful performances only the other day when I rejected, for *The American Scholar,* a review that came in over the transom of Gershom Scholem's *Walter Benjamin, The Story of A Friendship,* written by a young man who had graduated from college in 1978. It was a crisply written review but observant of every pietistic cliché about Walter Benjamin, and the author of the review seemed not to consider the possibility that of the two men, Scholem and Benjamin, it was Scholem who was the towering figure. But then a person under thirty who could write well about this particular book would probably have to be at least as smart as Scholem himself.

One of the things that reviewing taught me was that certain kinds of books made for better reviews than do other kinds. Biographies, autobiographies, diaries, journals, and collections of letters I have always found pleasurable to write about. The reason for this is that, even in fifteen hundred words, such books permit me to do a portrait in miniature of the author under review. Novels are less easily reviewed, especially if they are shoddily made, though it is best to be able to review a novelist who has written a number of novels so that one's review can turn on his career. Although I have reviewed books about poets, I have never attempted to review a book of poetry, and I have yet to see this delicate job well done in book reviews of normal length. The sad thing is that, given the lack of interest in poetry in the great world, few book-review editors feel justified in allowing reviews of poetry to run beyond the normal length; more often, they do not review poetry at all, except that written by established names—under the assumption, apparently, that what cannot be done well should not be done at all. Poets reviewing other poets is rarely a solution.

The ideal book reviewer ought to be someone whose passion for literature is evident in everything he writes. His own literary quality should be obvious in his prose. If he is an academic, he shouldn't allow this to show through. His point of view ought to be clear, recalling in this connection a remark made in a V. S. Naipaul novel that a collection of opinions does not necessarily add up to a point of view. Wit is helpful but not absolutely required. Courage is. If the reviewer cannot say what he thinks he does best to keep silent and not try to fudge his true views. A conscience is called for, too; for while the reviewer ought to be skeptical about new books, he must also be fair in his account of them. Finally, if this does not seem a contradiction, the ideal book reviewer probably does best not to review books too often, lest he become what Edith Wharton once called "a magazine bore." Too much book reviewing dulls the mind.

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I have rattled on at considerable length about the limitations of book reviews and of book reviewing, yet I myself continue to read book reviews and I continue to review books. On the latter front, though, I find myself more and more frequently turning down offers to review books, and not just because of insufficient space. For example, a late Friday afternoon call comes in from an editor of *The New York Times Book Review*; he informs me that he has in hand a book by a man who has written essayistically about the effects of women's liberation on men. It appears to be a serious book, he says, quite well written. He thinks I am the sort of person who has thought about such things, and could write interestingly on them. Unfortunately, he is wrong. I could not write well on such things; I could not write well on them because I have not much thought about them. And I do not much care to think about them. Women's liberation, midlife crisis, sexual identity, such items make up what I think of as the contemporary noise, and, thank you for asking, I would just as soon keep my voice out of it.

Yet I do find myself agreeing to review books I feel I ought to be reading. Novels, for instance. I have in recent years found it exceedingly easy not to read contemporary novels. A fat Styron, two Malamuds, three Robert Stones, four John Updikes, five John Irvings had passed through unread by me. Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Manuel Puig, a whole new generation of novelists had come into being without my having read them. I felt a certain bad conscience about this, and have since partially remedied it by agreeing to review fiction fairly regularly for *Commentary* magazine. There is this, too: writing about these novelists gives me a chance to have my say, or, as T. S. Eliot put it in his essay "The Function of Criticism," "to correct taste," for I have strong views about the novel.

Along with the aesthetic pleasure of forming what I hope are interesting sentences, the soupçon of glory to be had from appearing in print, and the delight in being paid money to read and write about books, the attraction of reviewing books for me has indeed been the chance it offers to correct taste—and I say chance because I am not aware of having specifically corrected any. Still, in reviewing a book one likes to think—I certainly began my own career by thinking—that one is in a serious conversation about the shape and fate of culture, itself a most serious thing. Ideally, the part of reviewing in this conversation is to place the books under review in their line or tradition and to judge their quality and importance. In reality I can think of no finer description of what this so-called conversation has become than Eliot's famous description of criticism generally as "no better than a Sunday park of contending and contentious orators." In this park everyone has his soapbox—feminists, Marxists, Poundians, Freudians, structuralists, deconstructionists. It sometimes seems as if only nudists and vegetarians are missing, and I am not too sure about the vegetarians.

The age of the lead-dust twins is long over; the rhinestone kids now hold sway. I continue to read book reviews but now chiefly to take a reading of the intellectual weather. Certainly reviews are not very much help in discovering what the good new books are. Reviewers like lots of books, but why they like them is often a mystery. Thus, to cite an example near at hand, the front page of the September 5, 1982, *New York Times Book Review* has a review of Joyce Carol Oates's novel *A Bloodsmoor Romance* by Diane Johnson. Miss Johnson is herself a novelist and a biographer, and a woman of some literary cultivation. She apparently thinks well of Miss Oates's novel. I say apparently because while she appears to be praising this six-hundred-odd-page work she never tells us what is good about it. The review is all plot summary, with a touch of explication (". . . Joyce Carol Oates has found a way to assuage our Puritanical guilt about escape by writing romance that is satirical, and thus about something, but which is still successful as romance") and a grain of criticism ("One seldom feels that from book to book one comes to know her

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better"). It ends on a fine note of ambiguous puffery: "Even those who find balloon abductions thin should be satisfied by this richness of detail."

The formula of Miss Johnson's review—limpid summary combined with limp criticism—has become increasingly common in the age of the rhinestone kids. Because of this abnegation of criticism in reviewing, writers who do not seem to grow better with age—Philip Roth, John Updike—nonetheless somehow become proclaimed masters, John Irving's novels receive praise of a kind that would have brought a blush to the cheek of Caesar, and *The New Republic* can run a piece of puffery by R. W. B. Lewis on the new editions of The Library of America next to the spewing flattery of which the normal television commercial sounds like Schopenhauer. In the rhinestone age, there is a great deal of glitter but there are no real gems.

The intrusion of politics into culture—one of the major motifs in the cultural history of the past quarter century—has of course not been without its effect on reviewing. If you write a book of criticism or history today, or any other kind of nonfiction, you get a sense of how very politicized our cultural life has become. Reviewing, you quickly learn, turns into a game of friends and enemies, and the way to tell a friend is that he shares your opinions. Your book either gets into the hands of reviewers who agree with your opinion, and who will praise your book for having the good sense to agree with the reviewer, or into the hands of reviewers who disagree with your opinions and who will smash your book for your having the effrontery to think differently than they. Most journals are pretty much lined up beforehand, and you can predict, depending on the opinions expressed in the book, how, say, *The Nation* and *National Review* will treat the book. In some cases you can't always guess in advance whether the book will be sent out to someone who will agree or disagree with it, and so you wait, as in roulette, for the ball to fall. But in the end it usually comes to the same thing: agreeing or disagreeing, neither of which is quite the same as reviewing.

"Hidden agendas," as the fine new phrase for secret motives has it, frequently can be read in book reviews in all sorts of places. In the cowardliness of a reviewer's repressed views can be read a fear of upsetting such powers as are thought to be, a hope for an improved social life, a wish to be invited back to do another review. Praise for books the reviewer obviously did not take pleasure or instruction from—Miss Johnson, for example, on Miss Oates—can mask a subconscious desire not to make waves, to show that one can be counted on to go along with the game. (The game in this particular case is to build Joyce Carol Oates into a major novelist, which, but for one little drawback, seems to be working: the little drawback being Miss Oates's novels.) Other reviews are clearly a matter of friends passing puffs, as when, a year or so ago in *The New Republic,* Mark Harris wrote a throttle full-out praising review of a collection of short stories by Richard Stern, Mr. Stern—*ahem*—being the dedicatee of Mr. Harris's own previous book. Other crimes could be catalogued here.

Yet one of the differences between life and literature in the United States is that in literature, with the possible exceptions of fraud and plagiarism, crimes go unpunished. A shame, really. What is needed is a court that, in the spirit of the Lord High Executioner, metes out literary punishment to fit literary crimes. Such a court might sentence Diane Johnson to read, and show proof that she has read, all thirty-odd of Joyce Carol Oates's books. It would require reviewers who have shown in their reviews distinct evidence of cowardice or obsequiousness to write ten reviews of Graham Greene's autobiography—five praising, five damning. Mark Harris and Richard Stern would be sentenced to slam, in conspicuous places, each other's next three books. As for first-time and minor offenders, they would be sentenced to read the collected reviews of John Leonard, and to discover in each review the exact point at which that particular rhinestone reviewer disappears up his own metaphors.

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Who now reads Macaulay?

by Gertrude Himmelfarb

"Who now reads Bolingbroke?" Burke asked, thus casually, irrevocably, consigning him to the ash-heap of history. So the modern historian may be tempted to ask, "Who now reads Macaulay?" Who, that is, except those who have a professional stake in him—professional in a very special sense, not historians who might be expected to have an interest in one of their most illustrious predecessors, but only those who happen to be writing treatises or monographs on him. In fact, most professional historians have long since given up reading Macaulay, as they have given up writing the kind of history Macaulay wrote.

Yet there was a time when anyone with any pretension to cultivation read Macaulay. It is often said that he was so widely read because he was so brilliant a stylist, so readable. This should not be taken to mean that he was easy to read, a "good read," as the English say. Even his essays were formidable—fifty-page disquisitions on Nugent's Memorials of Hampden or Mahon's War of the Succession, or the controversial hundred-and-twenty-page essay on Bacon. More popular and more formidable still were the five volumes of the *History of England from the Accession of James II,* some 2,500 pages covering fifteen years. Nor was it only the leisured classes who read the *History* (or, as one might suspect, bought and bound it for display on their shelves). The lending libraries did a thriving trade in it. Mudie's, the largest of the lending libraries, bought over two thousand copies of the volumes as they appeared, and business was so brisk that they had to set aside a special room to handle them. A gentleman living on the outskirts of Manchester invited his poorer neighbors to his house every evening after work and read the entire *History* aloud to them. At the end of the last reading one of them rose and moved a vote of thanks to the author "for having written a history which working men can understand," a motion the gentleman dutifully reported to Macaulay.

Today it is all one can do to get a graduate student in history to read, let alone understand, Macaulay. If the *History* is, as is commonly thought, a paean to progress, the history of the *History* is a sad testimonial to the cultural regression of our own times. Macaulay was pleased to think of his work as in a direct line of descent from Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*; he admitted that his was far inferior to that greatest of all histories, but it aspired to the same standard of greatness. He also privately confessed that he had been sustained, through all his years of research and writing, by the hope that his work would be remembered in the year 2000 or even 3000—not as arrogant a thought as it might seem considering the fact that Thucydides survived considerably longer than that. That remark was quoted in 1959, the centenary of his death, by a commentator who thought it safe to predict that Macaulay would indeed be read half a century hence, "if there are any readers left." It

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is not clear whether that ominous proviso referred to a nuclear holocaust or simply to the death of the written word as the result of television or a debased mass culture. What was not anticipated was that professional historians would turn against Macaulay, making him seem as unreadable and unmemorable as Bolingbroke.

In *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past,*[1] John Burrow makes a valiant attempt to revive our interest in Macaulay and three other historians of a later generation, William Stubbs, Edward Freeman, and James Anthony Froude. His account is sensitive, sympathetic, thoughtful; if one has any criticism it is that he makes too modest a claim on our attention. For he invites us to consider these historians not so much as historians of England recording momentous events in the past—Macaulay on the English Revolution, Stubbs on the "ancient constitution," Freeman on the Norman Conquest, Froude on the Reformation—but as Victorians reflecting in their histories ideas and attitudes peculiar to their own times. *A Liberal Descent,* we are told, "is intended as a study in Victorian culture and intellectual history based on the premise that one of the ways in which a society reveals itself, and its assumptions and beliefs about its own character and destiny, is by its attitudes to and uses of its past." This is surely not what Macaulay had in mind when he hoped to be read in centuries to come—as a specimen of Victorian culture rather than as an historian of the Glorious Revolution. Yet he and the others could hardly complain, since they themselves insisted, as Burrow amply demonstrates, on the "continuity of the past," the relevance of their subjects and their works to their own times.

Burrow himself is sympathetic to that idea of continuity, and it is almost ruefully that he announces a break in continuity between the Victorians and ourselves. His book has a pervasively elegiac tone, testifying to a kind of history, and the culture that produced that history, which is over and done with, which we can only understand and enjoy in its "remoteness." Macaulay, possibly even Stubbs, Burrow suspects, may continue to be read, but for the most part the great Victorian histories are the "triumphal arches of a past empire, their vaunting inscriptions increasingly unintelligible to the modern inhabitants"—monuments occasionally visited, he adds (in an uncharacteristically brutal expression, revealing a bitterness he does not normally allow himself), "as a *pissoir,* a species of visit naturally brief."

Burrow does not elaborate upon the reasons for this break in continuity, tantalizingly stopping short of those recent tendencies in historiography, like social history or the "new history," which would help explain it. But we must be grateful to him for rescuing "Whig history" from the odium that has enveloped it for half a century. In his famous *Whig Interpretation of History,* first published in 1931, Herbert Butterfield discredited the kind of history he associated with the Whigs, a history that distorts the past by reading it in terms of the present, that looks to the past for the origins and development of those institutions, traditions, and principles which the present deems notable and admirable, that judges the past by the standards of the present, and that makes of the past a battleground between the forces of light and darkness. For the classic Whig historian—Macaulay—history is the gradual, inevitable progress of political and religious liberty and constitutional, representative government. For the radical or Marxist historian it is the progress of democracy, equality, and socialism. In either case the integrity of the past is violated by the imposition of a specious pattern of progress and an anachronistic set of ideas.

Butterfield's book was a valuable corrective to the reductivist, determinist mode of history which belittles or obscures the complexities, contingencies, and discontinuities of the past, all those aspects of the past which were unique to it, which made it radically different from, rather than vaguely reminiscent of, the present. But the attempt

1 Cambridge University Press, 308 pages, $45

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to dissociate the past completely from the present, to counter a too intrusive "present-mindedness" with a too austere "past-mindedness," also has its perils, for it precludes, as Butterfield himself recognized, anything but the most antiquarian or narrowly monographic history. Burrow alludes to but does not dwell on Butterfield's thesis (except to remind us that Butterfield himself, in *The Englishman and his History*, written during the war, confessed his satisfaction with the Whig view of history, which had had such benign political consequences for England). But Burrow implicitly restores the balance in favor of Whig history by considering, seriously and respectfully, what it was that Macaulay and the others celebrated in the past, what of the past they wanted to revivify, and what of the present they wanted to legitimize by establishing its continuity with the past.

Burrow subtly shifts the grounds of the argument by changing the terms of discourse from the "Whig tradition" to the "liberal descent" of the title. The expression is Burke's.

> Always acting as if in the presence of canonized forefathers, the spirit of freedom, leading in itself to misrule and excess, is tempered with an awful gravity. This idea of a liberal descent inspires us with a sense of habitual native dignity, which prevents that upstart insolence almost inevitably adhering to and disgracing those who are the first acquirers of any distinction.

One wishes Burrow had also quoted the preceding sentence, in which Burke urges us to look upon "our liberties in the light of an inheritance," or the earlier paragraph which makes the point more sharply:

> The idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission; without at all excluding a principle of improvement. It leaves acquisition free; but it secures what it acquires . . . . By a constitutional policy, working after the pattern of nature, we receive, we hold, we transmit our government and privileges, in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives.

The Burkean idea of the "inheritance" of liberty is more compelling than the familiar idea of the "progress" of liberty. "Progress" says nothing about the mechanism by which liberty advances, nothing about the means by which the past evolves into the present; it only asserts that there is such an evolution, as if it were foreordained, inherent in the nature of man and history. It might even be the kind of "metaphysical" principle Burke so abhorred. The "inheritance" of liberty, on the analogy of the inheritance of property, is more concrete and substantive. It suggests the several stages through which liberty, like property, passes: the original act of acquisition, the protection of that acquisition, the acquisition of additional liberty (or liberties—the plural is more appropriate to this metaphor), and the transmission of what has been so laboriously acquired and preserved. It also suggests, as the idea of progress does not, that what has been acquired can be lost or taken away, in whole or in part (again the plural form is more fitting). Far from being assured by some providential order, liberty in this image is seen as vulnerable and precarious, in need of all the laws, institutions, conventions, and principles which encourage its acquisition and transmission.

Burrow assimilates Macaulay into the "Burkean tradition," and there is much to justify this. It might have been Burke writing that magnificent passage in the *History*: "As our Revolution was a vindication of ancient rights, so it was conducted with strict attention to ancient formalities . . . . When at length the dispute had been accommodated, the new sovereigns were proclaimed with the old pageantry." Yet Macaulay was an imperfect Burkean, more of a "trimmer," a compromiser and conciliator, as Joseph Hamburger has argued, than a Whig. (It is revealing that Macaulay twice contemplated writing about Burke and twice abandoned the project, once after

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being well into it; that missing essay is a conspicuous gap in his corpus.) Burke's reverence for tradition, history, established institutions, and conventions was rooted in a theory of natural law: "the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and moral natures, each in their appointed place." For Burke expediency, compromise, prudence, and the pragmatic accommodation to "circumstances" were the means, not the ends, of policy. For Macaulay, lacking any such commitment to natural law, they were the ends, the only principles of government.

Macaulay was not even comfortable, as Burrow points out, with the idea of the "ancient constitution," although he sometimes invoked it for rhetorical and polemical purposes. The ancient constitution had for him the double liability of being reactionary and revolutionary: reactionary in not acknowledging the debt liberty owed to modernity, revolutionary in threatening to subvert the distinctive institutions of modernity—the monarchy, most notably—by appealing to the ancient ideal of a republic. In the battle of the ancients and moderns, Macaulay was unequivocally on the side of the moderns. (His *Lays of Ancient Rome* Burrow dismisses as a *jeu d'esprit*.) Liberty, he maintained, was not ancient; it was peculiarly modern. "In almost all the little commonwealths of antiquity, liberty was used as a pretext for measures directed against everything that makes liberty valuable." It was England, not Greece or Rome, that gave birth to the traditions he cherished.

> Senate has not to our ears a sound so venerable as Parliament. We respect the Great Charter more than the laws of Solon. The Capitol and the Forum impress us with less awe than our own Westminster Hall and Westminster Abbey . . . . Our liberty is neither Greek nor Roman; but essentially English. It has a character of its own—a character which has taken a tinge from the sentiments of the chivalrous ages, and which accords with the peculiarities of our manners and of our insular situation. It has a language, too, of its own, and a language so singularly idiosyncratic, full of meaning to ourselves, scarcely intelligible to strangers.

For all their differences, however, Macaulay and Burke belonged to a common tradition, that "liberal descent" which both took to be the glory of England. And so, too, Burrow maintains, for all their more considerable differences, did those other Victorian historians, Stubbs, Freeman, and Froude. On the surface "liberal" hardly seems an apt label for any of them, least of all for the Tory, High Churchman William Stubbs, who resigned the Regius Professorship of Modern History at Oxford in 1884 to become Bishop of Chester (and, later, Bishop of Oxford). While Stubbs's own political views were decidedly conservative, his *Constitutional History of England* (1873-78) was generally acknowledged to be fair and judicious. Yet it did have political implications, even, according to Burrow, Whiggish implications.

The "ancient constitution" he described, with its populist local assemblies, its legal institutions such as the jury, and a property system favoring the independent freeholder, was designed to secure those principles of "personal freedom and political right" which were an essential part of the Whig or liberal tradition. Later developments, to be sure—the Norman Conquest, feudalism, and the rise of the nation-state—altered that ancient heritage, but enough survived to preserve some continuity with the past and to give promise of some continuity with the future. Stubbs, no less than Macaulay, looked forward to that "truer and brighter day, the season of more general conscious life, higher longings, more forbearing, more sympathetic, purer, riper liberty," indeed "unto the perfect day." If his was not quite the Whig view of history, it was a Tory view that made conservatism itself, the appeal to the past, the guarantor of progress and freedom.

When Edward Freeman, in his *History of*

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the Norman Conquest (1867-79), extolled the ancient constitution it was from the point of view not of a Whig or Tory but of a radical and democrat. Having coined the epigram, "History is past politics, and politics is present history," he was suspected by some of his contemporaries of making of history not so much past politics as present politics. Burrow reverses this judgment, arguing that it was not his politics that determined his history but his history that determined his politics. His enthusiasm for the national liberation movements of his own day derived from his reading of the early history of certain peoples. "Every stage that has been taken towards the unity of Germany and Italy is not a step towards something new but a step back towards something old." Unlike Macaulay and like Stubbs, Freeman believed liberty to be ancient rather than modern. "As far at least as our race is concerned, freedom is everywhere older than bondage . . . . Our ancient history is the possession of the liberal." This was a distinctly un-Macaulayite kind of progress, a progress towards the restoration of the past. And it was an un-Macaulayite kind of liberalism, not pluralistic, pragmatic, latitudinarian, but homogeneous, doctrinaire, restrictive. This great proponent of democracy and freedom, of republicanism and national self-determination, was also an avowed racist and xenophobe; only the Aryan race, he insisted, and only special breeds of Aryans at that, could aspire to those ancient liberties and privileges.

In this odd quadrumvirate of historians, James Anthony Froude is the odd man out. He and Freeman were bitter enemies, his contempt for Freeman's politics being matched by Freeman's contempt for his scholarship. In fact, Froude's *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (1856-70) was not as inaccurate and contrived as Freeman made it out to be. Froude's reputation, however, was such that it seemed plausible to attribute to him the sentence that was said to have concluded his contribution to Newman's series on the *Lives of the Saints*: "This is all, and perhaps more than all, that is known of the life of the blessed St. Neot." That sentence did not actually appear in Froude's book on St. Neot, but a variant of it did appear in one of the other *Lives* co-authored by Newman himself: "And this is all that is known, and more than all—yet nothing to what the angels know—of the life of a servant of God."

More controversial than Froude's scholarship was the interpretation that colored his *History,* and here he consorts most uneasily with Burrow's other subjects. Where Stubbs and Freeman exalted the ancient constitution and Macaulay the modern, Froude, like his mentor Carlyle, despised all constitutionalism—"constitution-mongering," Carlyle called it. And where the others exalted some idea of liberty, Froude proudly traced England's descent from the Tudors, whom he saw as benevolent despots and as strong natural, paternal rulers presiding over a strong, confident, imperial nation. It was a romantic history he wrote and a heroic past he celebrated, a past that threw into sharp relief everything he disliked in Victorian England: the dreary industrialism, enervating liberalism, vulgar materialism, and petty laissez-faireism. But while he did not share the Whigs' enthusiasm for liberty and representative government, he did share their admiration for Protestantism, and in this respect he contributed a vital ingredient to the Whig interpretation of history. As Macaulay legitimized the Revolution, so Froude legitimized the Reformation, a Reformation that was Whiggishly undoctrinaire, more moral than theological and more national than ecclesiastical.

In choosing these four historians as the exemplars of the "Whig tradition"—or "liberal descent," as he prefers—Burrow is obviously stretching the ideas of "liberal" and "Whig" beyond their conventional meanings. And in treating respectfully their common commitment to the "continuity of the past" he is also implicitly suggesting that the "Whig interpretation" is not necessarily the fallacy Butterfield made of it. For the Victorians, he points out, it was more

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often the past that informed the present than the reverse ("We are Cavaliers or Roundheads," William Lecky said, "before we are Conservatives or Liberals"). And in Burrow's account their sense of an intimate relationship between past and present becomes a source of strength rather than weakness—of imagination, passion, and sheer force of mind.

This is an important message to derive from the Victorians. But another message emerges when we contrast them to our own culture and the current mode of historical writing. The Victorian historian could take for granted what we no longer can: not only the continuity of past and present but the political nature of that continuity. Whatever period he traced his descent from, the principles he identified with that period were essentially political; and those principles were transmitted by way of political institutions and traditions. To Burrow, taking his stance with the Victorian historian and Victorian culture, this is so obvious it needs no saying. Today, however, with social history displacing political history as the primary mode of historical scholarship, one can appreciate how crucial that political dimension was both to Victorian history and to Victorian culture—indeed, to the very idea of a continuity between history and culture.

Historians have always written social history, in some form and to some degree. The famous third chapter of Macaulay's *History,* on the state of England in 1685, covers many of the subjects that are now the preoccupation of the social historian: population, agriculture, mining, the growth of towns and of London, modes of travel, inns, coffee houses, newspapers, books, science, the arts, the various social classes, the "common people," child labor, pauperism, wages, the standard of living. But this is only one of six chapters of the first volume of the *History.* Moreover, as Jacques Barzun has pointed out, it appears in the middle of the volume, not at the beginning or end as one might expect; the political narrative is already well under way by the time it begins, so that this chapter is a static interlude in an otherwise dramatic tale. The current mode of social history, the "new history," is far more ambitious, laying claim if not to all of history, as some social historians would like ("total history," as it is called), at least to the dominant, determinant part of history. Even subjects that look political, the staples of the old history—a parliamentary reform act, for example—are "socialized" by the new historians, analyzed in terms not of parliamentary debates or constitutional changes but of social classes and economic interests. More often the subjects themselves are unpolitical: the family, popular culture, social mobility, work, leisure, sex, death, crime, insanity.

This is not to say that social history does not have political implications. It most certainly does, and more blatantly than conventional political history. The most popular kind of social history is the most populist kind: the much vaunted "history from below," the history of the "anonymous masses," of those people who led lives so ordinary that they never made the pages of history, never emerged from the obscurity of their anonymity. Historians now vie with each other in plumbing the depths of that "history from below," in rescuing from oblivion one submerged group after another: working men, women, and children, racial and ethnic minorities, and the "outcasts" of society—deviants, criminals, the insane. One of the latest examples of this genre is *A Mad People's History of Madness,* consisting of extracts from writings by the mad ranging from the medieval mystic Margery Kempe to the modern novelist Mark Vonnegut. Hailed by one reviewer as a "welcome contribution to history from below," it will no doubt soon be faulted for being insufficiently "from below," including as it does such eminences as Kempe and Vonnegut rather than the lowly, anonymous inhabitants of Bedlam and Bellevue.

In contrast to this new form of social history (and such other modes of the "new history" as psychoanalytic or quantified history), Victorian history was insistently political. The Victorians shared, not only with

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each other but with their predecessors going back to Herodotus and Thucydides, an essentially political conception of both the past and the present. They assumed that the polity—some kind of polity, ancient or modern, folk or state, Whig or Tory, national or imperial—was the bearer of that tradition (or inheritance, as Burke would say) which made for the continuity of past and present, present and future. They also assumed that politics was a higher form of activity, realizing the higher purposes of human beings, engaging their higher natures, involving them in a higher, more rational form of life than the activities of daily life. When Macaulay prepared his readers for the chapter that was to deal with the "history of the people as well as the history of the government," with art and science, religion and literature, manners, dress, furniture, and amusements, he added that he would "cheerfully bear the reproach of having descended below the dignity of history." But it never occurred to him to descend so far below the dignity of history as to make these subjects the whole or even the major part of his work.

It took a new breed of historian to find in daily life the dignity and essence of history, to make of it the "infrastructure" while relegating politics to the "superstructure," the realm of "epiphenomena." By now, after only two decades of the "new history," this reversal of values, a truly Nietzschean "transvaluation of values," has so captured the imagination that an eminent social historian can defend his enterprise by citing a common mistranslation of Aristotle: "Man is a social animal." What Aristotle said, in fact, is that "man is a political animal," that only in the *polis*—not in the "household" or in the "village"—is man truly human, decisively different from "bees or any other gregarious animals." And the *polis* differs from society precisely in its political organization, the government, laws, constitution, institutions, and traditions by means of which—and *only* by means of which, Aristotle believed—man consciously and rationally fulfills his distinctively human purpose, the "good life." The Victorian historian understood this instinctively, as he also instinctively looked for his roots in the past, a political past. The new social historian, rejecting any such "elitist" idea as the good life, seeking only to understand *any* life, indeed regarding it as a triumph of the historical imagination to explore the lowest depths of life (as in that *Mad People's History of Madness*), may be forgiven for misquoting Aristotle; one is only surprised to find Aristotle's name invoked at all.

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"Images of America": the Precisionists

by Hilton Kramer

More than twenty years ago—in the fall of 1960—Martin L. Friedman organized an exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis that significantly altered our perspective on American art between the two World Wars. It was called "The Precisionist View in American Art," and it consisted of paintings by, among others, George Ault, Ralston Crawford, Stuart Davis, Charles Demuth, Elsie Driggs, Louis Guglielmi, Louis Lozowick, Georgia O'Keeffe, Morton L. Schamberg, Charles Sheeler, and Niles Spencer. Some of these artists had long been highly regarded, of course. A few were established classics. Others—George Ault and Elsie Driggs, for example—Mr. Friedman had rescued from an undeserved obscurity. Whatever their degree of fame or obscurity, however, most of the painters represented in the "Precisionist View" exhibition were no longer very much discussed by critics, curators, and historians caught up in the more immediate excitements of the New York School. Avant-garde opinion tended to dismiss them as irrelevant, and academic opinion in those days paid scant attention to any aspect of American modernist art that could not be regarded as part of the direct ancestry of the New York School. Mr. Friedman had thus performed an important service in restoring these painters to our attention, and in reminding us of their special qualities—qualities that contrasted sharply not only with the tastes and practices then dominating the contemporary art scene but with the spirit that governed it as well.

Precisionist painting was not, for one thing, a mode of abstraction. It was deeply attached to a particular subject matter. As the Precisionists saw it—and they were not alone in this respect—theirs was a very American subject matter. For the imagery of Precisionist painting was largely derived from the artifacts of American industrialism. Skyscrapers, steel bridges, modern factories and water towers, ocean liners, automobiles, locomotives, airplanes, traffic lights, all the machines and structures that by the Twenties had come to shape and define the very life and spirit of the American metropolis—these exerted a tremendous appeal for artists of the Precisionist school. It was in the artifacts of twentieth-century industrialism, indeed—in their forms, in their speed, in their materials and textures, and in the modality of their production—that the quintessential spirit of the modern age was seen by the Precisionists to reside. Industrial production was looked upon as marking a decisive break with the past, and its forms were regarded as the idiom of the future. They were seen to constitute the distinctively modern element in modern life. It was for this reason, too, that so many European artists and writers took New York City to be pre-eminent as a model of modernity. As early as 1913, Francis Picabia characterized New York as "the Cubist, the Futurist city." "It expresses in its architecture its life, its spirit, the modern thought," Picabia declared on

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his first visit to New York. "You have passed through all the old schools, and are Futurists in word and deed and thought." What to Picabia in 1913 had looked exotic and avant-garde, even revolutionary perhaps, was soon embraced by the artists of the Precisionist school as the central impulse of their native civilization.

The subject matter of Precisionism was important to these painters in another respect as well. It played a decisive role in determining their pictorial vocabulary. In strictly formal terms, of course, Precisionism derived from Cubism. It was Cubism, particularly in its early, "analytical" phase, that gave Precisionist painting its fundamental syntax. In the radical way that Cubism altered the depiction of objects in space by reducing their visual constituents to a highly simplified, quasi-geometrical structure of plane surfaces, Precisionist painting found the key to its own style. Yet strictly formal terms, while they have much to tell us about the spirit as well as the substance of Precisionist painting, do not finally account for its peculiar vision. For it needs to be understood that Cubism was, for the Precisionists, a means rather than an end in itself. It was in large part their special subject matter—and their attitude toward this subject matter: an attitude that was aesthetic, impersonal, and curiously romantic—that led them to adopt and modify the Cubist vocabulary. Cubism gave the Precisionists a way of encompassing the experience of the new industrial environment as an aesthetic phenomenon.

There was nothing in the way of social analysis or social criticism in the Precisionist outlook. Precisionism was not a documentary style. It took no interest in the minute observation of urban life. It did not concern itself with the social or economic implications of industrialism. It was not an art of social consciousness. It looked upon the world of skyscrapers and smokestacks as something especially beautiful—a new beauty that was uniquely the product of the machine age. From this beauty, moreover, it drew its models and its program, which was to produce an art that was as sleek, as hard, as streamlined and immaculate, and as monumental as the industrial objects and structures that inspired it. Charles Demuth said it all when he gave to the finest of his industrial-motif paintings of the Twenties the title *My Egypt*. Clearly the comparison he wished to invoke was that of the pyramids. In the smokestacks and factory towers of his native Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Demuth felt that he had found the closest thing to an object of grandeur the modern world had to offer. Being a dandy and an aesthete, he no doubt harbored mixed feelings in the matter. Yet there is nothing satirical in the art itself. However tinged with irony the comparison of contemporary Lancaster with ancient Egypt may have been for Demuth, irony plays no role in his painting of industrial subjects. On the contrary, he treats them with a kind of exalted lucidity—with an emotion akin to religious awe. Charles Sheeler was even more explicit about the "religious" parallel. "Our factories are our substitute for religious expression," he once observed, soon after completing a series of stunning photographs of Chartres Cathedral. (What he clearly had in mind was his own earlier project in photographing the Ford Company's River Rouge plant.) We are thus reminded that the Precisionists were often quite consciously involved in elevating the iconography of industrial technology to a realm that invited comparison with the mythic monuments of antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The Precisionists were, in other words, turning the iconography of industrialism into a species of myth and romance. The pictorial world of Precisionism is a timeless world. There is no history in it. Its imagery tends to be archetypal and axiomatic. Nothing in it moves or changes. Its universe is a universe of stability and stillness. All sense of menace and risk has been removed from it. The dynamism of the industrial machine is banished, too. In his essay for the catalogue of the "Precisionist View" exhibition, Mr. Friedman had pointed out that the artists of the Precisionist school applied the

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methods of analytical still-life painting to their outdoor subjects, and this observation remains a key to our understanding of the Precisionist aesthetic. It reminds us that Precisionist painting is devoid of people and events. Above all, it cautions us not to expect from Precisionist art an account of the historical world from which its imagery is drawn.

It was inevitable, I suppose, that the passage of time would sooner or later alter our perspective on the Precisionist school, and it is indeed a very different perspective that is given us in the exhibition called "Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography" that Karen Tsujimoto has organized for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.[1] The past two decades have brought us a great many publications and exhibitions in this field, and Miss Tsujimoto, the associate curator at San Francisco, is thus in the happy position of being able to bring to the organization of this exhibition a far more comprehensive knowledge of the principal figures of the Precisionist movement than has been possible hitherto. More important than any new information about individual figures, however, has been a development that lies outside the realm of painting itself. This is the enormous interest in the history of photography that, beginning in the Sixties, has quickly won for that discipline a position of parity in certain fields of art-historical study. Miss Tsujimoto has taken full advantage of this development in organizing the "Images of America" exhibition. She may even have overdone it. There are more than a few photographs in the show that have, at best, only a tangential relation to the subject under review. And the disproportionately large number of photographs in the exhibition—out of a total of one hundred and sixty-one works in this show, eighty-seven are photographs—threatens at times to make painting and drawing appear to have served as a mere appendage to an artistic phenomenon primarily photographic in its interests.

This is not to say that the whole subject of Precisionism does not warrant an ample representation of photographic art. The Precisionist aesthetic unquestionably exerted a tremendous influence on American photography in the period between the two World Wars. Precisionist painting was itself, in turn, deeply influenced by photographic images. Some of the outstanding painters in the movement were themselves photographers of distinction, and about Sheeler—the most important among them—it might even be said that, despite his considerable renown as a painter, it is in photography that his most enduring achievements are likely to be found. Certainly on the evidence of this exhibition, which gives us an opportunity to study certain of Sheeler's paintings along with the photographs on which they were based, it tends to be in the photographs that we find the most vital images. By comparison, the paintings of the same subjects tend to have a bland, illustrational quality that is entirely missing from the photographs. In this instance, at least—and there are others, too—Miss Tsujimoto has added something important to our knowledge of Precisionism by including photographs that are an integral part of its aesthetic history.

All the same, there is definitely something askew in the way the exhibition has been selected. We are constantly made to feel that there were interests being served in the selection that have little or nothing to do with the principal theme of the exhibition. No doubt one of these interests has to do with the size of the show. It would probably have proved to be impossible to mount an exhibition on this scale if photography had not been somewhat indiscriminately used to fill out the requisite bulk. Important paintings

1 "Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography" was shown at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from September 9 to November 7. It is currently on view at the Saint Louis Art Museum (December 10–January 30), and will then travel to the Baltimore Museum of Art (February 28–April 25), the Des Moines Art Center (May 23–July 17), and the Cleveland Museum of Art (August 15–October 9).

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are far more difficult to acquire for large, travelling loan exhibitions than photographs are. (Demuth's *My Egypt,* for example, one of the stellar attractions in Mr. Friedman's "Precisionist View" exhibition, could not be secured for the "Images of America" show.) A smaller exhibition, no matter what its merits might be, would run into difficulty in attracting both the necessary funds and the collaboration of other museums on the lookout for a "major" loan exhibition. Nowadays small exhibitions are not, in any case, good box office, and box office has become a compelling concern in the museum world. In this case, as in many others, photography has proved to be a godsend.

But the scale of the "Images of America" exhibition is by no means the only consideration that contributed to its curiously distorted selection. There was undoubtedly an element of regional chauvinism involved. Precisionist painting was, by and large, an East Coast movement. It was centered mainly in New York. One can easily understand why this fact might prove to be a problem for a curator in San Francisco. Might it not suggest that in the heyday of the Precisionist movement San Francisco—and the West Coast generally—was something of an artistic backwater? In this respect, too, photography has come to Miss Tsujimoto's rescue. While the West Coast contributed little to Precisionist painting, it has given us an impressive roster of photographers—among them, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, John Paul Edwards, Alma Lavenson, Sonya Noskowiak, Peter Stackpole, Henry Swift, Willard Van Dyke, Brett Weston, and Edward Weston—who might, with a little adjustment, be claimed for the movement. This is indeed the claim made by Miss Tsujimoto in the "Images of America" exhibition. Not only is photography thus elevated to a place of parity with painting, but the West Coast is made to seem to be a force equal to—and maybe, at times, even a little more than equal to—that of the East Coast in its contributions to the Precisionist movement.

Even this, however, does not exhaust the list of pressures that have been brought to bear on the selection of the exhibition. There is also what can only be called the "affirmative action" question in regard to some of the women represented in the "Images of America" show. In most instances, this is not a question easily separated from the representation of photography, for most of the women in the exhibition are photographers—and this suggests yet another reason why photography is given so large a role in the show. But in one case, certainly, Miss Tsujimoto appears to have made yet another adjustment in her view of Precisionism in order to include a painting—as it happens, a very good painting—for extra-artistic reasons. The painting in question is Helen Torr's *Windows and a Door* (1926-35). This is a wonderful little painting, but it has nothing to do with Precisionism. Everything about this picture marks it as belonging to another order of sensibility. I daresay that if it had been painted by a man, it would never have been included in this exhibition. But Helen Torr is an artist we are only just now rediscovering, so a special allowance had to be made. She was the wife of the more famous Arthur Dove, and *Windows and a Door* happens to be far closer in spirit and method to Dove's work—which is not, and should not be, represented in the "Images of America" show—than anything to be found in the history of Precisionism.[2] Clearly the decision to include this work was not a disinterested one.

It is not only in the selection of works that are included in the exhibition, moreover, that Miss Tsujimoto has given us a revisionist view of the Precisionist movement. In the book-length catalogue she has produced to accompany the exhibition, she has attempted—not altogether successfully, I am glad to say—to give us a sociological interpretation of the movement that is often at considerable variance with the spirit of the pictures

2 For my views on Helen Torr as an artist, see my article "Art: Rediscovering Helen Torr's Work" in *The New York Times* for April 4, 1980.

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we see on the museum's walls.[3] Miss Tsujimoto is clearly impatient with and discomfited by the purely aesthetic interest that many of the Precisionists took in the spectacle of industrial technology. She does not quite know what to do with their tendency to turn it into a species of myth and romance. She seems to yearn for a degree of social consciousness, even social protest, that is just not to be found in the pictures. If anything, the pictures tend to celebrate the beauty and energy of industrial production, not to denigrate it or protest against it. She therefore has a difficult time coming to terms with what the Precisionists actually achieved. Reading the text that she has written for the *Images of America* catalogue, one sometimes has the impression that she would be more at home in writing about a different subject—the W.P.A. mural movement, say, or the social-protest art of the Thirties.

Consider, for example, the opening paragraph of this catalogue text:

> America at the turn of the century was basically an agrarian society, divided between the extremely wealthy and the very poor. The wealth of America was concentrated in the East within the hands of relatively few, among them J. Pierpont Morgan, head of the mightiest banking house in the world; Andrew Carnegie, whose personal income in 1900 was over $23 million with no income tax to pay; John D. Rockefeller and Cornelius Vanderbilt. There were, in contrast, thousands of citizens for whom life, especially in the city, was not pleasant or easy. Particularly in New York, but in other cities and industrial towns as well, many American families were living in a state of poverty.

Lest anyone assume that Miss Tsujimoto has conjured up this picture of the Robber Barons in order to confront a paradox—namely, that the Precisionists should have become so enamored of the industrialized world that these figures did so much to bring into being—I must hasten to inform you otherwise. More than anything else, she seems to want to make it known at the outset that her heart is in the right place. She is not much of a social historian, in any case. The only work cited to support her rather simple-minded view of American history at the turn of the century is, alas, Frederick Lewis Allen's *The Big Change: America Transforms Itself, 1900-1950,* which appeared thirty years ago and was not exactly, even then, a very weighty account of American society in the twentieth century. But this, I am afraid, is altogether characteristic of what passes for social history in the texts of museum exhibition catalogues.

It would be pleasant to report that Miss Tsujimoto shows a firmer grasp of the history of art and architecture in this text, but this is not altogether the case, either. Further along on the first page of the *Images of America* text, we are treated to the following account of American architecture:

> In its architecture, America looked to the past, emulating Europe and the Greek classics. As Merle Armitage recalled, "The architecture of our houses was monotonously hideous, and cornice-conscious red brick stores were everywhere. Carnegie Libraries in the form of aborted Greek temples were being erected throughout the land, and the prevalent concept of a state or county building was a compromised replica of St. Peter's in Rome." Although Louis Sullivan was in mid-career, it was not until several years later that America began to be conscious of simplicity and function in its buildings. Modern architecture, as far as America is concerned, did not really begin to define itself until the mid-Twenties.

It would be difficult to know where to start in attempting to untangle this mess, and it would not be terribly rewarding, in any case. But several things in it are worth commenting on. The most obvious, perhaps, is the fact that the skyscrapers, bridges, and

3 *Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography* by Karen Tsujimoto. University of Washington Press. Hardcover, $40; paperback, $19.95.

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factories that the Precisionists painted and photographed with so much feeling in the Twenties were already in place when they came to them. These were not imaginary structures. There are, for example, two paintings by Louis Lozowick depicting skyscraper architecture in the "Images of America" show. One is called *Pittsburgh* (1922-23), the other *Chicago* (1923). Both are reproduced in color in the catalogue, but one wonders how closely Miss Tsujimoto had looked at them in preparing her essay. For both their subjects and their dates make hash of everything she has to say about American architecture in the passage I have quoted. As for those "cornice-conscious red brick stores" that so offended Merle Armitage, moreover, hasn't Miss Tsujimoto ever noticed—in her researches into the period—how beloved they were by the painters and photographers of the Twenties? For that matter, if she takes a good look around her native San Francisco, she will find that those "monotonously hideous" houses are today among the most desired habitations in the city. She is, I am afraid, merely mouthing ideas that have long been discredited and out of date.

This is not an approach that takes us very far in attempting to understand the Precisionist movement—or, indeed, anything else in our cultural history. It is one thing to express some dissatisfaction with the formalist view of art history, and to want to act on it in preparing an exhibition of this sort—which cries out for some illumination of its social dimension. Obviously, Miss Tsujimoto is recoiling from the sectarian interpretations of modernist art that formalist criticism had long imposed upon it, and there are certainly good and ample reasons to resist such a narrow reading of art history. But all that she has to offer in its place is a confused amalgam of dated avant-garde shibboleths and radical tags that in the end serves only to elucidate the assumptions that govern it. The task of writing the social history of American art is going to require a good deal more in the way of study and of thought than Miss Tsujimoto imagines. A few facile references to Frederick Lewis Allen and Merle Armitage will not do.

The sad fact is that an important opportunity has been missed in the "Images of America" exhibition. Interest in the Precisionists is very high at the moment. New exhibitions and publications devoted to individual artists in the movement follow in a steady stream.[4] What we have needed is a large exhibition and a comprehensive study that examine this movement with a fresh eye and new ideas, and this was what we had every reason to expect to find in "Images of America." Now it is unlikely to be done for another generation.

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4 Just now, for example, there is an exhibition of "The Prints of Louis Lozowick," organized by Janet A. Flint, at the National Museum of American Art in Washington (through April 10). Mrs. Flint is also the author of *The Prints of Louis Lozowick: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Hudson Hills Press, $50), published to coincide with the exhibition.

A retrospective exhibition devoted to the work of Morton L. Schamberg, accompanied by a catalogue written by William C. Agee, is currently on view at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, 22 East 80th Street in New York (through December 31). It will later travel to Columbus, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Milwaukee. (This exhibition will be reviewed in a forthcoming issue of *The New Criterion.*) And a George Ault exhibition—the first since the Whitney Museum exhibition in 1974—is on view at the Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, 24 East 81st Street in New York (through December 11).

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Art

The sculpture of Joel Shapiro

by William H. Jordy

Stepping into the big second-floor gallery space of the Whitney Museum, one can see twelve years of Joel Shapiro's work, spanning the decade of the Seventies and edging into the Eighties.[1] Look in one direction (toward the beginning of his career), there are tiny pieces sparely spread on the floor. Insofar as they are images, they suggest austere toys. On the walls, even more sparingly distributed, other tiny objects are shelved and bracketed. Look in the other direction (toward his present work), there are more small pieces on the floor, but weightier now; more shelved and bracketed pieces, too, not much larger physically than some of their earlier counterparts but visually more assertive. The dominating pieces at this end of the gallery, however, are nearly life-sized figures. At first glance (requiring later correction), they look as the Cubi personages of David Smith would look if crossed with an artist's manikin. Like Smith's figures, these are also fashioned of rigid rectangular elements—long and tubular for limbs, flat and box-like for the torso, cube-like for the head. The emphasis on images of objects at one end of the gallery shifts to figures at the other. And of course much of the work projects off the wall and rises well off the floor.

Yet the sense of the floor and the walls remains. All the torsos are angled toward the floor, genuflecting. Even where the figure balances on a single leg, the torso tilts toward the floor, while the other limbs (sometimes three, sometimes more) angle rigidly in all directions, like a blasted tree or a mad pinwheel. Or the figure angles head-down to the floor, with flung arms making a tripod in what comes across more as a crash than an incipient head stand. One of these figures, the most recent in the group, has two heads, one at either end of the torso: Icarus, so to speak, ascendant and wrecked in a single image. If genuflection is invariable for these figures, so is the tilted right angle made by two of the limbs; the other limbs (as many as there may be) go off akimbo. The right angle seems to refer to the right-angled walls of the gallery, so there is continuity here. Shapiro's preoccupation with the floor and the walls of the gallery at the start stays with him, except that now the figures skew the architectural reference toward their own wild animation.

Sculpture so conscious of the floor and four walls of the gallery indicates the persistence in Shapiro's work of preoccupations which were very much to the fore in the Minimalist movement at the end of the Sixties, when he first began to exhibit. Together with a number of other artists just getting underway around 1970, Shapiro absorbed the lessons of the dominant Minimalist movement of the mid-Sixties while

1 "Joel Shapiro," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, October 21 through January 2. The exhibition was organized by Richard Marshall. It will travel to Dallas, La Jolla, and Toronto.

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attempting to free himself of its abstractness, impersonality, rigidity, and tendency toward large-scale statement and enigmatic portentousness. Hence, Shapiro's work can be seen to embody "trends" in the Seventies. Not that his work is to be grouped with that of any other sculptor, or with any specific "movement." But this singularity in itself was common in the Seventies, when quirky individualism was more characteristic of artistic achievement than were magisterial "movements." As Roberta Smith emphasizes in her essay in the catalogue for the exhibition,[2] by the mid-Sixties the major movements of the Fifties and early Sixties (Abstract Expressionism, Color Field, Pop, etc.) had reached what now seem to be the temporary end-phases of Minimalism and Conceptualism. In some desperation, the tangle of individual efforts to go "beyond" the dominant radical movements at the end of the Sixties was tagged as Post-Minimalism, where the prefix (as usual) says less about the nature of the work than about what it took off from and no longer is. Among conservatives, Realism of various sorts held sway. Post-Minimalism and Realism were the big labels of the decade. In themselves, they indicate some resting on the oars in the larger currents of history, a need to drift for a while into more wayward eddies. All of which has its charms, but siren risks as well, which can be quite as treacherous as braving the big flows midstream.

Like others of his generation, Shapiro, who was born in 1941, began by using Minimalist and Conceptual methods and ideas. But he ruffled their pristine character by directly assaulting precedent. Three bars of metal (1971) with equal dimensions—copper, bronze and zinc—got two hundred whacks apiece with a ball-headed hammer, and the dented and bent results are exhibited as an abject, somewhat whimsical (or maybe violent) response to Carl Andre's palette of metals. In a more intellectual vein, seventy-five pounds of magnesium join seventy-five pounds of lead, the one a long, dull-silver, rod-like rectangular solid, the other a short, black-silver block. A wad of clay clenched in the hand, with a pointed bit squeezed out of the fist like toothpaste from a tube, becomes with minor adjustment a tiny "bird." Wounded or dead, it is laid on a shelf as a precious object cast in bronze. "Untitled, 1972," the exhibition label reads. Virtually all the works bear this anonymous label: a tiny bridge, all triangles on the floor (spanning twenty-two and a half inches, 1971-73), "Untitled"; a primal, straight-backed chair on the floor, even smaller (only three inches high, although it holds its own in the vast space, 1973-74), "Untitled"; an equally primal house-form on the floor (box with gable roof, five inches high, 1973-74), "Untitled." If bronze makes the "bird" unexpectedly precious, and its situation makes it unexpectedly vulnerable, these other toys on the floor are austerely, gravely cast in iron. They are at once fiercely present, because of their sense of weight and their iconic intensity of shape, and possessed of a sense of remoteness and lostness, as of something seen so far away (or so far back) as to exist only in memory. Edged in sentiment, they skirt the sentimental by their austerity of conception, justness of proportion, density, and subtle patina or texture of material. In such works, Shapiro invokes in his own way Brancusi and especially Giacometti as precedents for nudging Minimalism toward a primal imagery with the psychic overtones of everyday allusion.

All the while, as he creates sculpture, Shapiro displays accumulating strategies for conceiving and making it. Taken together, his strategies typify those of other artists of his generation. They appear as themes in his work, however, with exceptional purity, directness, and originality, especially in his early pieces, where he is obviously gathering and testing his means. The theme of *process* is isolated as a strategy in the simple action of the hammer or the clenching and unclenching of a hand (recalling the famous video performance of Richard Serra catching or barely missing bits of metal as they cross the

2 *Joel Shapiro,* by Roberta Smith, with an introduction by Richard Marshall. Paperback, $14.

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screen from above). The theme of *density* and *weight* is exemplified in the joined bars of magnesium and lead. The *psychic extension* of minimalist forms, subverting their scale and abstractness, occurs in the bird, bridge, chair, and house. This continuous dialogue between the strategies for sculpture and the sculpture itself is at the very core of Shapiro's creativity. In this respect, Peter Schjeldahl (as Robert Smith reminds us) compared Shapiro's approach to that of Paul Klee.

One moves along in the exhibition to a series of works in which the void surrounding a sculpture is made equivalent to the substance of the sculpture, and possessed of an equal intensity. A little house is skewed at one end of a path-like rod bracketed from the wall at near eye level, and directed straight out into the spectator's space (1974). (It is really the magnesium rod with the little lead box at one end.) From the spectator's end of the path a vertical depends. Here the diminutive house exists as a remote, remembered image, slightly warped; the path, with its vertical barrier at the end, a literal check to access. Shapiro sees the house as past and part of memory, the space made by the angle of the projecting path and the barrier as present and part of actuality—the actuality of the spectator, who stands before the piece to peer down the distancing path at the primal house of childhood. This piece (which re-invigorates a strategem of Giacometti's) is already one of the key works of the Seventies.

But other pieces, too, play with this theme of substance and void. A bracketed shelf in bronze creates a plane (or perhaps a plain) at the center of which, against the wall, there is a square hole, with a square tube depended from it (1978). The void experienced from the top is equivalent to the solid experienced beneath. The androgynous allusion is intended. But so is the literalism of the shaft as the "bracket" supporting a "shelf." Nearby, on the floor, there are two small, black iron boxes with sides at back and bottom, but without a front or top (1975 and 1976). Hence the boxes trap slotted voids, pockets of shadow so intense that the void takes on substantiality. Again the androgynous allusion; but again the implacable object, here literally sucking the space of the surroundings into itself. Yet another sculpture opens to other themes. A black iron pinwheel shape on the floor with an angled hub at the center, looks—now that we look at it intently—for all the world like one of the early, slightly skewed houses laid on its side, but with its side walls extended as trajectories, one in one direction, the other in the opposite, to make the pinwheel configuration (1977). Look again and the right angles made by the angled house-hub and the opposed trajectories imply two rectangular voids each open to the expanse of the floor. They approach one another in an angled relationship, leaving the pinwheel solid as the apparent residue, cast from chunks of the void.

Trajectories: another strategy in Shapiro's sculptural arsenal. They show themselves in the thick black chalk paths which trace out stepped and rectangular forms in his sizeable drawings. More recently, they appear angled and branched like trees or limbs reflecting Shapiro's present concern with the big figures.

It is in the sense of their resulting from trajectories angled in relation to the floor and walls of the gallery (or some other architecural setting) that these stick figures, made of four-by-four timbers transmuted to bronze, differ markedly from David Smith's Cubis (1980-82). Smith's works are juggled as hollow, scintillant silver, stainless steel boxes, edge lightly welded to edge, up into space—preferably outdoor space—in the classical manner of the gravity defying figure, and usually with over life-sized heroics. Shapiro himself feels that his work has no particular affinity with the Cubi figures of Smith. The angled trajectories made by the bronze timbers (unfortunaetly, no pieces left in wood were included in this exhibition) not only seem to thrust outward from their torso cores but also seem to move in from the outside to make the figure. Repeatedly,

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in various contexts, Shapiro has spoken of the play in his work between what comes from inside the piece and what is brought to it from outside. In his figures the joints are important; not, however, as joinery, for here nail holes and oozing glue are evident. It is rather the way in which the timbers collide with the tilted torso core, or by-pass it, or angle into one another, or twist partly against the core and partly off it to create swiveling angles in various directions. Textures, too, are important, and not only the textures made by the crude, though cunning, carpentry. There are subtler effects in some of the pieces, like "heads" made of plaster (prior to casting) and given an arbitrary texture that contrasts slightly with the natural graining of the rest of the figure, invoking ever so subtly a contrast between thought and physical action. In a figural piece still in his studio, the body in natural wood contrasts with the head painted light blue. The catalogue (but not the exhibit) shows a fine double-headed figure with limbs and upper-head in yellow pine, torso and floor-head in red cedar. To specify the materials is to imply a more precious aim for them than the work reveals. The mix may have originated as an effort to obtain various kinds of textures within the piece. When the maquette became the finished piece, however, it seems to have been partly the differences of meaning among the anatomical parts that interested Shapiro, and partly the appeal of improvising with the stuff at hand.

Shapiro has done other figures, again not in the show, in which the invariable right-angled reference to the gallery disappears and all limbs are akimbo. Still others, currently in his studio, explode the figure into fragments. (In an early work Shapiro took a jointed wooden artist's manikin, broke it apart, and [like Giacometti in his *Woman With Cut Throat*], strewed the dismemberment about the gallery floor.) There is fierce control in most of the works exhibited, but the fierceness implies underlying passion as well, which may well burst through in future work.

In short, a fascinating show. On the one hand, there is the continuous demonstration of means, sometimes a bit off-hand and a little too casual, in an artist who prefers the economy of techniques which allow him to keep moving. For those interested in "trends" —how a resourceful and imaginative artist might work his way through the Seventies out of the manifold possibilities offered by Minimal and Conceptual art to make his own impressive statements—there is much to see in this exhibition. On the other hand, those interested in "art" will not go away disappointed either.

English landscapes

by Rackstraw Downes

"Presences of Nature: British Landscape 1780-1830," an exhibition of paintings currently on view at the Yale Center for British Art,[1] is organized on a novel plan. Its curator, Louis Hawes, noting that the experience of nature was the great and original subject of the period in painting, as it was in poetry, has abandoned the usual methods of presenting the British School in terms of masters, mediums, and formal development. In this show great and small, precursors and followers, oils and watercolors all appear together under six headings: Mountain Landscapes, Coastal Scenes, Ruin Landscapes, Rural Landscapes, Landscapes with Laborers, and Townscapes. These were categories of subject matter common at the time the works were painted. An interest in subject matter seems to be shared just now by painters and critics as well as scholars. One effect of the presentation of the Yale show was to turn it into a study not of painting but of images—one wondered why popular prints should be excluded—and the source of these images in the taste, sentiments, and sensibility of the time. To look at paintings this way is to see them in terms of

1 The exhibition will run from October 20 through February 27.

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exactly what, if they survived as art, they transcended. In the catalogue to the exhibition,[2] Hawes tells us that sea-bathing became popular at the time since it was considered beneficial to the health, and that this stimulated an interest in coastal scenes. But to depict a coastal scene in a painting does not make nature present there. Hawes has chosen a suggestive title for the show. In painting, "Presences of Nature"—the phrase is Wordsworth's—are only made felt by virtue of art.

From the point of view of art, Turner, as a watercolorist, stands out in all six categories, while the absolute prize of the show is Constable's large oil *Hadleigh Castle*. This masterpiece, the best Constable on public view in the northeast, should convert anyone who still thinks only Constable's small sketches are worth looking at. It easily stands comparison with the most famous landscapes of Rubens, Ruysdael, and Claude. Its subject is not a fine view of the mouth of the Thames from the high vantage point of a ruined castle, but palpability—the palpability of air, moisture, and the movement of the wind. Constable makes you feel these insubstantial presences by attending to their visible, unifying effect on things. It is an idea he did not always realize as fully, especially when he included architecture that was near to his eye; the Salisbury Cathedrals at the Frick or the Metropolitan are flat and separate. His absorption in the view and a real way of scanning it is intense and unaffected enough to abolish logic of style—there are little boats on the horizon of this picture that can only be seen when the viewer is so close up that the foreground vegetation has already turned abstract. His picture holds together by sustained sympathy of feeling. Hadleigh Castle is one of the wilder spots that Constable painted, but he resists the romantic afflatus. He was both older and younger than the age he lived in. He has a lot of the late eighteenth-century stay-at-home provincial about him; the nature he represents is hospitable and cultivated, his small figures live and work in it; but it is not a generalized convention, and it exists distinct from his reaction to it; it is a precise fact, and its wonders, so far from being numinous or unfathomable, are amenable to the truly watchful. In this he is more like Dorothy Wordsworth than William.

It is interesting to compare Constable's oil sketches made directly from nature (a very unusual thing to do at the time), with those of the recently rediscovered Thomas Jones, who had practiced the same method a generation earlier. Jones is almost like some of today's realists who paint what it looks like without deciding what property of what it looks like to paint. Lacking a concept or a convention to fall back on, he seems nervous, constrained, intense.

What most interests Turner in nature is energy, force: not only a precipitous waterfall, or a storm in the mountains, but also a light that liquifies everything, the expansiveness of space. While Girtin or Cotman make smooth washes that lie glassily on the paper, Turner, using much more varied color and texture, treats his page like the mouth of a balloon: the space just behind it inflates, incredibly elastic, to a scale Constable never imagined. Things interest him less and less, the forces themselves more and more, and this developing vision seems to be a function of the allusive, filmy quality of watercolor. He is the absolute, fearless virtuoso of watercolor as Rembrandt is of pen and wash. He is never so good with oil, and the eccentric things he eventually did to it seem an attempt to make it do for him what watercolor always did.

The Yale show breaks off in 1830, before this phase of his work began, but it can be supplemented by the work in the Center's permanent Turner room, and by a revealing new book, *J. M. W. Turner: France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland*,[3] by Andrew Wilton, a former curator at the Yale Center. It con-

2 "Presences of Nature: British Landscape 1780-1830" is published by the Yale Center for British Art and distributed by Yale University Press; 224 pages, $45 clothbound, $17.95 paperback.

3 Braziller, 208 pages, $20

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tains good reproductions of watercolors that derive from his sketching trips all over continental Europe. Wilton gives a table of Turner's itineraries which show what a prodigious traveler he was. He carried soft-bound sketch-books with him which he could roll up, and relished getting stuck in foul weather. He seems to have favored places that offered the acme of whatever interested him, the wild scenery of Switzerland, the ancient monuments of Rome, the reflected light of Venice. He wanted to be right there, overwhelmed, where the forces of nature and history revealed themselves. He seems to have actually made only tiny pencil sketches on the spot, and worked his watercolors indoors from memory, and this seems right, because he is of all landscape painters more interested in the essence than the evidence. Hawes's catalogue reveals that Turner regularly made scale exaggerations —perhaps one should say intensifications— when working up watercolors from pencil sketches. Small in stature, he was the Napoleon of nineteenth century landscape: it is as though he wanted to possess the natural and historical soul of Europe. His imagery forms a bridge from antiquity to the Industrial Revolution, which he saw not picturesquely, as a red factory in a green field, but with prescience, as a force taking its place among the forces of nature. His figures are diminutive and puny, and when he paints them as individuals he often has trouble with them. But when eventually they merge into crowds, peoples, populations, as in the *Zurich* Wilton reproduces, they too become a force, or representative of a force, like the "humanity" Tolstoy writes about at the end of *War and Peace*. In the permanent collection at Yale are two small sea sketches that are perfect distillations of his art. Forgetting his need to be a great artist he became a marvelous oil painter; the sketches represent wetness and air without any waves or clouds, and the sail of a ship in one of them is reduced to a pale immanence.

Hawes and Wilton both in their ways write about art with the purpose of illuminating it. It is hard to say the same of Ronald Paulson in his new book *Literary Landscape: Turner and Constable*.[4] Paulson is Thomas E. Donnelly Professor of English at Yale. He has decided to treat visual form as a rebus whose solution lies in literary interpretation. He arms himself with a battery of intellectual theories, literary knowledge, and circumstantial evidence, but has neglected to train himself in elementary looking. The ruins of *Hadleigh Castle*, for instance, observed and realized elements in Constable's study of weather, he refers to as a "Gothic convention." Old castles, thank goodness, are available to other kinds of vision than that of Mrs. Radcliffe. The arts have their separate morphologies, and critics who ignore this—to judge from Paulson's book—are reduced to writing exercises in donnish ingenuity.

4 Yale University Press, 288 pages, $18.95

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Music

Berlin on two coasts

by Samuel Lipman

The Berlin Philharmonic, under the direction of Herbert von Karajan, came to our shores in October to play eight concerts. The first four of these concerts were given in New York's Carnegie Hall; the last four took place in an auditorium in Pasadena, California.

Orchestra touring is hardly a rarity today. American groups—notably the New York Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony—regularly tour the United States, and circle the globe as well. Foreign orchestras too come here regularly. Already, during October and November, the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, the Amsterdam *Concertgebouw,* the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra, the *Gewandhaus* Orchestra of Leipzig, the *Orchestre Philharmonique de France,* the Prague Symphony Orchestra, the Chamber Orchestra of Turin, and the Polish Chamber Orchestra have appeared at Carnegie Hall. Indeed, so frequent is the phenomenon of the traveling orchestra that local orchestras now seem increasingly national and international.

Even so, an American tour by the Berlin Philharmonic remains a special attraction. The contemporary manifestation of a great tradition, the Berlin group is now one hundred years old. Its first chief conductor was Hans von Bülow, the son-in-law of Franz Liszt and later the cuckolded disciple of Richard Wagner. The orchestra's second leader was Arthur Nikisch, who succeeded Bülow in 1894. In 1913 the Berlin Philharmonic, under Nikisch's baton, made the first recording ever of a complete symphony. From 1922 to 1954, Berlin's chief conductor was Wilhelm Furtwängler, the master of a particularly German emotionalism in the performance of the great romantic masterworks.

Under Bülow and Nikisch, the orchestra's glories were musical, its problems financial. Under Furtwängler the musical glories and the financial problems remained, but to them was added the new and almost lethal contribution of Hitler and Naziism. Though Furtwängler attempted to perform such "degenerate" composers as Paul Hindemith despite the Nazi ban, and though by most accounts he attempted to protect non-Aryan members of the orchestra against the provisions of the Nuremberg laws, in the end he too capitulated, neither retiring from public life nor choosing, as did such famous musicians as the brothers Adolph and Fritz Busch (and Hindemith himself), to join the "other Germany" in exile. Under Furtwängler the orchestra continued to play even after its own concert hall was bombed out. Though the quality of its work suffered from the expulsion of Jewish players, it continued under Furtwängler to give concerts notable for their passionate commitment and air of high tension. Recordings of live performances from this time, many of them still available, constitute a peculiar testimony to the ability of great musical performance to exist with every kind of tyranny.

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Furtwängler's last years with the orchestra, before his death in 1954, were marked by some great music making, though his most significant work—the performances of Wagner's *Ring* at La Scala and in Rome—was done with other orchestras. These declining years were marred by his gathering egomania and a progressive deafness (his podium in Berlin had to be wired for sound). So strong, however, was the Berlin Philharmonic's dependence on Furtwängler that his death on the threshold of the orchestra's first American tour threatened to be catastrophic. Fortunately, Herbert von Karajan was ready and willing to assume Furtwängler's mantle; so ready was he, in fact, that as a condition of his coming in he insisted on being made conductor for life. He got his way. For close to thirty years he has been identified with the Berlin Philharmonic.

Karajan was born in 1908. He first came to public attention in the small town of Ulm, where at the age of twenty-two he became the head of a small opera house. From Ulm he graduated to Aachen, where both his responsibilities and the standards of performance were on a vastly higher level. In 1938 he conducted the Berlin Philharmonic as a guest and caused something of a sensation. An invitation from the Berlin State Opera soon followed, but the successful young conductor was unwilling to accept the offer of a debut in a lightly regarded modern opera. Instead he demanded—and got—performances of *Fidelio, Tristan,* and *Die Meistersinger.* Here, in an important review perhaps owing something of its enthusiam to Nazi backing (Karajan had, for opportunistic reasons, joined the party in 1935), he was hailed in an important Berlin newspaper as *Das Wunder Karajan*—"the miracle Karajan."

He was now securely established. During the war, he continued to conduct at the Berlin State Opera. At the end of the war, not surprisingly, he was seen as something of a Nazi sympathizer and was therefore initially unacceptable to the victorious allies. But in 1946 he conducted the Vienna Philharmonic. Then he came under the patronage of Walter Legge, the powerful head of artists and repertory for English Columbia, a branch of EMI. In 1947 Karajan first came to London to conduct Legge's newly founded Philharmonia Orchestra. Here, as in Vienna, he made a series of well-received recordings, including a famous rendition of Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (Legge's wife) as the Marschallin.

At the same time, too, he was conducting at Bayreuth, where his 1951 performances of *Die Meistersinger* and the *Ring* set standards of orchestral playing that remain to this day. Along the way he became head of the Vienna Opera. His seven-year tenure there, from 1957 to 1964, was stormy and finally ended in acrimony. He conducted often at Salzburg, at La Scala in Milan, and at most other centers of European musical life. So busy was he that he was called the *Generalmusikdirektor* of Europe. It was told of Karajan that upon being asked by a taxi driver where he wanted to be taken, he answered: "It doesn't matter. They want me everywhere." And he made records by the score, at first for EMI, then for Decca, in recent years for Deutsche Grammophon. These discs have sold in the millions and have carried the gospel of Karajan worldwide.

Karajan's activities these days are fairly restricted, and his association with the Berlin Philharmonic takes precedence over everything else he does in music. Though it is a cooperative orchestra in which new members are chosen by the incumbents, subject only to the conductor's veto, the ensemble plainly reflects the care and thought Karajan has given it, especially in lavish rehearsal time, during which he has been able to instill in minute detail his musical conceptions.

The programs announced for the four Carnegie Hall concerts did not, on their face, seem terribly exciting. Strauss's *Alpine Symphony,* an overlong potboiler in the guise of a virtuoso showpiece, was mated on the first concert with Stravinsky's chaste and refined ballet score *Apollo*; the four symphonies of Brahms were divided between the second and third concerts; the final

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concert was devoted solely to Mahler's Ninth Symphony. The Pasadena programs presented the Strauss and the Stravinsky, two Brahms symphonies, the Beethoven *Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, and, once again* on the final night, the Mahler Ninth.

Because the Strauss is such meager music, because the Stravinsky is hardly a German romantic specialty, and because the Brahms symphonies are so often done, the most interesting program in New York seemed to be the Mahler. Here was one of the best of Mahler's symphonies played by a great orchestra under the leadership of a conductor who, for whatever political and musical reasons, had come late to that composer's music. The work had been remarkably suited to the conducting abilities and the personal style of Pierre Boulez; his performance of the work during his sojourn with the New York Philharmonic had presented the orchestra in a flattering and unaccustomed light. The piece, too, was one of Bruno Walter's favorites, and his performances of it, in *some sense profiting from Walter's early* association with Mahler (he had conducted the work's premiere in 1911), are still to be found in record catalogues.

Heard playing the Mahler in Carnegie Hall, the Berlin Philharmonic seemed nothing less than a revelation. In smoothness alone the orchestra seemed to invite immediate comparison with an expensive automobile. For those used to the harsh and rough sounds of the New York Philharmonic the Berlin string tone appeared almost supernatural. *Pizzicati* were always together, and sudden dynamic contrasts were achieved with an ease which only increased the impression of suddenness. First-chair string players performed their solos not only with absolute security—that, with the Berlin, is quickly taken for granted —but also with such sweet comfort and effortless virtuosity that characteristic sonic differences between violin, viola, and cello where almost obliterated.

Among the winds, the emphasis was on lightness and grace. The bassoon playing in particular was delicate without any concomitant loss in strength. The flutes too were remarkable; the oboes, *mirabile dictu,* completely lacked the coarse and aggressive tone so much in favor today with larger American *musical institutions. The brass played pene*tratingly without being in any way forward; the trumpets in particular were models of discretion. Missing everywhere was any hint of the musical conception so widespread in our own national style of orchestral playing: the idea that large-scale symphonies are in fact concertos for brass and tympani masquerading under another name.

The total effect of it all was to make Carnegie Hall sound like the great hall that it is, but that it so rarely (given what takes place on its stage) has a chance today to be. Here were the glorious acoustics one never gets in Fisher Hall. Here was strength, clarity and lightness, fullness without vulgarity. One's gratitude was so strong that one could not but feel that the Berlin Philharmonic is the greatest orchestra before the public at the present time.

*Without doubt, the lion's share of re*sponsibility for the triumphant impression the Berliners made in this concert must be assigned to its conductor. The physical bearing alone of the string players, sitting at the front of the stage, their legs uncrossed, their bodies taut with anticipation, their expressions conveying both eagerness and commitment, proclaimed that here was an orchestra with a respected and vastly powerful director. Given the orchestra's important role in personnel decisions, this power clearly does not stem, as it does in other groups, from the conductor's power to hire and fire. It comes plainly from musical authority, constantly exerted and willingly accepted. The achievement of such an ascendancy over a body of musicians, by itself, securely establishes Karajan as a great conductor. He is certainly the most important conductor to have emerged since World War II.

Such high praise hardly requires that Karajan's conception of orchestral playing remain beyond critical comment. In music, as in life, achievements are made at the cost of other achievements. In the case of Karajan

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and the Berlin Philharmonic, the striking prominence of rounded melody is often the result of the suppression of inner, less obviously important, parts. These parts are purposely played so softly and so gently that they cease to be heard as distinguishable lines and can only be felt as harmonies. The orchestra itself is capable of remarkable clarity, as explicitly contrapuntal passages frequently demonstrated. It is rather Karajan's musical decision that the audience be given at almost all times only one thing to listen to, and that one thing is properly (by his lights) the most easily perceptible melody.

As if to prove that not even Karajan—and a Berlin Philharmonic—is perfect, on one important occasion in the Mahler performance the orchestral leadership and performance were flawed. When a sudden change from a slower to a faster tempo was called for, neither the conductor nor the orchestra seemed in control of what was happening. At one point in the symphony's second movement, Mahler requires a second tempo *Poco più mosso subito* (a small amount faster immediately) and then, after several tempo changes and a *ritardando,* a sudden return to the *Poco più mosso subito,* this time *aber etwas schneller als das erstenmal* (but somewhat faster than the first time). All went well enough at the first speedup, but at the further increase in tempo, the ensemble was ragged, the effect both heavy and tacky. The responsibility was obviously Karajan's. In this case, his method of communicating (eyes closed) expressive intentions rather than rhythmic directions hardly sufficed.

Beyond this instance of the failure of directorial control and orchestra response, there arose a wider problem of Karajan's conception of the Mahler symphony. Enormously attractive as it was, it all seemed an approach to Mahler for people who (like this writer) don't really like Mahler. Karajan seemed at pains to avoid what might be called a "woodsy" Mahler, a musical evocation of Vienna and Austria at once sentimental and rustic. This kind of Mahler was the specialty of, among others, both Walter and the Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg. Even Boulez, through a certain roughnes, paid tribute to this idea of the composer. But for Karajan, Mahler seems a species of Bruckner, or rather a domesticated version of Bruckner's idol, Richard Wagner. Indeed, Karajan plays Mahler the way he plays Wagner: classically, symphonically in an older, pre-late romantic sense, emphasizing a surface delicacy and transparency. Real Mahlerians doubtless find this approach reserved, cold, and even bloodless.

But whether one adores Mahler or not, Mahler still remains Mahler: romantic, not classical, peripheral to the orchestral repertory rather than solidly at its core. For this reason, one of the subsequent Pasadena concerts—the third—seemed particularly significant. Here, in the Beethoven Sixth, followed by the Fifth, Karajan and his orchestra confronted undenied musical greatness. Here also, as in the other Pasadena concerts, one had a chance to hear this magnificent orchestra in a small 1200-seat hall (at Ambassador College). Because the symphonies of Beethoven were hardly written to be heard in such enormous halls as Carnegie, with its capacity of 2800, Pasadena provided an opportunity to confront the conductor and his players intimately, to find out whether they sounded as good up close as they had from afar.

At this concert at least, the verdict must be mixed. On the positive side, it must be said that the sounds the group made at the Ambassador Auditorium were never too loud, despite the large size of the orchestra. Still, the close-to-perfection of the New York performance of Mahler was missing in the Pasadena performances of Beethoven. Part of the disappointment lay in the orchestral execution itself; string intonation was sometimes wayward, and the horn and trumpet playing displayed some of the clumsiness when playing Beethoven so often found in the brass choirs of lesser ensembles. Rhythm—particularly in the differentiation between eighth and sixteenth notes—seemed often so slack as to verge on sloppiness. Sometimes too the orchestra seemed

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sluggish in those loud passages which also were fast, as if it was too much of an effort to do both at the same time.

Some of the orchestra's problems in this concert were doubtless due to an understandable letdown after playing in New York to such acclaim. Some of the listener's reaction too was undoubtedly caused by the paradoxical acoustics of Ambassador Auditorium, where the X-ray effect of closeness in making mistakes so audible was not balanced by a parallel gain in clarity. But even on this less than ideal occasion, some of the playing was miraculous. The marvelously clear and unforced but always projected execution of the fugato by the cellos and basses in the third movment of the Fifth Symphony was a case in point; another was the remarkable wind playing—again from the bassoons—in the fourth movement of the Sixth Symphony.

Beethoven, of course, is more difficult to play than Mahler, and not just for the orchestra. Not only must the conductor compete against every great recorded predecessor or present performing colleague; he must manage to perform the music straight, without noticeable divergence from the composer's written directions; at the same time he must suffuse everything with his personality in a way that marks off his realization of the music from that of everyone else. So difficult is this to do that it often seems we are living in a time of no great Beethoven conductors at all.

It can hardly be said that Karajan, at least in this particular concert in Pasadena, satisfactorily met the challenge. At the very beginning of the concert the first movement of the Sixth Symphony seemed to go even faster than Beethoven's already quick metronome indication. Karajan's tempos were fast throughout the evening, but their speed hardly guaranteed any real quality of excitement. The famous transition between the third and fourth movements of the Fifth Symphony, for example, was singularly ineffective. This passage, which conductors as different as Toscanini and Furtwängler have managed to make spellbinding seemed in Karajan's treatment perfunctory; the famous arrival in C Major at the beginning of the fourth movement was spoiled by a straightahead pace and an even further bit of rushing on the downward curve of the opening phrase. And all Karajan's haste exacted a heavy toll at the end of the symphony. The *sempre più Allegro* and the subsequent *Presto* which closes the work were both ragged, with syncopations late and the general effect turgid rather than stirring.

It was difficult not to feel that even had everything gone perfectly with the orchestral execution and Karajan's leadership on this warm Southern California evening, there would still have been something lacking. The lack perhaps is in Karajan's idea of Beethoven. He seems to approach this music —and this approach is audible on his innumerable Beethoven recordings as well—with a peculiarly mixed style, as if he were not playing Beethoven but rather a music by someone else which looks and sounds like Beethoven. That someone else may well be Wagner, whose *Ring* (along with the operas of Strauss) Karajan does better than any other conductor alive. Indeed, several passages in the Beethoven Sixth did remind one, in Karajan's rendition, of famous places in Wagner: The quiet end of the second movement seemed an anticipation of the end of Act II of *Die Meistersinger*, and the famous storm music later on in the symphony seemed straight out of the musical weather which precedes the gods' entrance into Valhalla in *Das Rheingold*.

It must be said that Karajan's magnificent conception of Wagner is not itself a simple matter. He seems to treat this music as if it were a kind of Mozart, requiring not primordial weight and seriousness but rather translucence, lightness, and grace. But what is successful in Wagner's overwritten music is not so apt for Beethoven. The Beethoven of the largest symphonies is in dead earnest, the very epitome of musical (and moral) seriousness. To rush Beethoven, as Karajan often does, is to lose touch with the music's general elevation, and not even to be able to project the excitement contained in the

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specific passages Beethoven meant to go like the wind. Toscanini too, toward the end of his life, often lost contact with Beethoven when he rushed, but Toscanini at least always seemed totally involved. Karajan, by contrast, often seems to be imperfectly committed to Beethoven.

On the next night, the first three movements of the Mahler Ninth seemed to take up where the Beethoven had left off. The orchestra hardly seemed as sharp as it had in New York, and the marvelous integration which had characterized the earlier performance was lacking. The orchestral tone, so marvelous in Carnegie Hall, seemed both bottled up and grainy in the smaller hall; the important harp parts, so audible in Carnegie because of the instruments' position at a front side of the stage, almost disappeared because of the players' relegation back into the orchestra. And the places which had suffered in ensemble in New York fared no better in Pasadena.

But then came one of those extended moments of which concertgoers dream but only rarely experience. The fourth movement of the Ninth, more than twenty minutes long, is distantly derived from the sublime slow movement of Beethoven's final string quartet, opus 135; the two movements are even in the same key of D flat major, and their melodic shapes (though not their prevailing emotionl character) often seem close. But whereas Beethoven goes on from this fairly brief lyrical episode to end his work with wit and even gayety, Mahler chooses to end his symphony with this slow movement, in all its self-indulgent melodic concentration. In a great performance, the result, though hardly life-inspiring, can be shattering.

Karajan's performance of the last movement of the Mahler in Pasadena was indeed shattering. Seamless, breathless without being hurried, gloriously played by the orchestra as a whole and at the end by its solo strings, the total impression was not just of a supreme orchestra playing under the inspired direction of a conductor of historical stature. Even more, one felt in direct contact with the German approach to music as a whole, stressing at every moment the art as an ontological reality transcending the earthly world. Here was not merely a *Liebestod,* a death through love, like that with which Wagner ended *Tristan und Isolde.* Here was a veritable *Musiktod,* a death through music.

That this stupendous achievement, so central to the very idea of *deutsche Kultur,* came about in the playing of depressing music by a Central European Jew, by an orchestra which now looks back proudly upon its continued existence even during the satanic period of World War II, under the direction of a man whose own past is not clean of Nazi affiliations and who himself came only very late to Mahler, should not surprise connoisseurs of the relationship between art and life. Painful though the experience may have been, it was better to have heard it than not.

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Letter from London

Opium and empire

by Mimi Kramer

The London theater season seems to be off to an uneasy start this year with *Poppy,* a major musical at the Royal Shakespeare Company's new home in the Barbican Theater. Its book and lyrics are by Peter Nichols, author of *The National Health* and *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg,* and its music is by Monty Norman, best known for his theme for the James Bond movies. *Poppy* adapts for the musical stage a rough outline of the history of the English Opium Wars with China in the reign of Queen Victoria.

The story it tells is one of hypocrisy and exploitation: of how, in order to provide a market for the opium produced by sharecroppers in their Indian domains, the Victorians encouraged opium addiction in China; of how, when the Chinese Emperor attempted to obstruct the importation of opium, English guns were brought to bear against Chinese crossbows; and of how, in the conflict which raged on and off for the next forty years, the island of Hong Kong was ceded to the British Crown and the Summer Palace at Peking, repository of two thousand years of Chinese history and culture, was looted and razed in a single act of British vengeance.

Poppy will inaugurate the RSC's first season at the Barbican. Located in "the City," the heart of London's business district, the new center for the performing arts, elegant and impressive though it is, is by no means easy to get to (except perhaps by tour bus). When it reopens in repertory, *Poppy* will be rivaling last season's box-office smash, the National Theater's brilliant and exuberant production of *Guys and Dolls,* in the more easily reached performing arts center on the Thames Embankment. With *Poppy,* the RSC is also attempting to follow up the wild success that *Nicholas Nickleby* enjoyed last year in both London and New York. The RSC may find that, for a number of reasons, *Poppy* is not up to the task.

For one thing, whereas both *Nickleby* and *Guys and Dolls* were joyous, celebratory productions, Nichols's new play is a darker, more provocative offering, an attempt to use musical comedy as a vehicle for social and political satire. *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Guys and Dolls* were an escape from ambivalence; *Poppy* seems like nothing so much as a celebration of ambivalence. In it, Peter Nichols subverts the very form of traditional theater whose special elements made *Nicholas Nickleby* so popular.

Poppy is neither straight musical comedy nor straight social satire. English audiences and critics alike describe it as a pantomime —only that doesn't mean what you think. Americans use the term "pantomime" to mean "dumbshow," or acting without words. But in England pantomime is a seasonal form of family entertainment, complete with singing, dancing, audience participation, and lots and lots of spectacle.

Each year at Christmas time, when Americans make family outings to *The Nutcracker,* the English take their children to a Christ-

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mas pantomime to see an old story retold in a style of pageantry and buffoonery. Growing up as it did in the Victorian music hall tradition, pantomime is pervaded by a certain spirit of slapstick and nationalism; it also comprises certain standard elements, stock situations, and traditional gags.

Drag, for instance, is an essential ingredient of British pantomime. There is always a Principal Boy (the nominal hero) played by a leggy girl showing a broad expanse of thigh, and a Principal Dame (the dowager) played by a man. As a result, there is also always a love interest between two women, and a goodly number of references to the questionable sex and dubious proclivities of the drag characters. This for the grownups.

For the children there is a well-known tale—Cinderella and Dick Whittington being the classic pantomime characters—set against a painted backdrop of charming storybook villages and narrated in rhyming couplets by good and bad fairies. There is always a much-loved secondary hero—the "Buttons" figure in *Cinderella*—a trusty manservant whose love for the Principal Girl is not requited. And there is always at least one pantomime horse, made of two actors, whose foremost end is expected, at some point during the show, to squirt pantomime tears of pantomime sorrow.

There are also a number of running gags a pantomime audience expects to see and a number of standard exchanges in which they are expected to participate. For instance: the "Oh, no, there isn't"/"Oh, yes, there is" joke. Let's say the pantomime horse sees something frightening behind the hero and registers pantomime terror. The hero turns round and sees nothing—naturally enough, since whatever it was has disappeared for the moment. "There's nothing there," he reassures the horse confidently. "Oh, yes, there is," the audience calls out gleefully. "Oh, no, there isn't," counters the hero in pantomime obliviousness. "Oh, yes, there is . . ." and so on, until the actor tires of the gag, because the children never do.

Or there is the "Look behind you!" gag. "Listen, everyone," says the hero, "I'll just go on with my number, and if you see anything, you shout out, 'Look behind you!'" So he does, and they do, and of course when the hero turns round to look behind him, there is nothing there to see. And somehow his number never gets performed because the joke goes on until whatever it was almost gets the hero.

Then there is the community-singing number. Toward the end of every pantomime there is a song with a rousing chorus, and the audience is asked to join in. A giant placard bearing the words to the chorus descends, and the actors lead the audience in a good old sing-along. And no matter how enthusiastically the audience sings, after the first two choruses the characters on stage decide that the audience is not trying hard enough, split them down the aisle, and hold a competition, complete with gestures, to see which half of the audience can sing out their part the loudest and the best.

This sort of thing—along with a seemingly endless supply of smutty jokes—is the blood and bones of British pantomime, and audiences throughout the kingdom adore it. The Principal Boy gets the Principal Girl, the Pantomime Villain is foiled, and Buttons walks off into the sunset with the Pantomime Horse, everybody's favorite couple.

This, then, is the form which Peter Nichols and director Terry Hands use to present the story of the English Opium Wars. For anyone unfamiliar with either English history or the pantomime tradition, *Poppy* offers generous explanations. *Poppy,* we are told, in addition to the flower, is Cockney rhyming slang for "money," and the basic elements of the pantomime convention are clearly defined for us by a very young and very appealing Queen Victoria (Jane Carr). Scoffed at by "clever intellectuals" but loved by "good honest folk," the pantomime tradition, she tells us, is the proper study for all those who want to protect the status quo.

Sure enough, *Poppy* has all the basic ingredients of pantomime. The historical context is set by a doggerel prologue between the godlike heads of the two great

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empires, Queen Victoria and Tao-Kuan, Emperor of China and last of the Manchu Dynasty (Tony Church). The first scene introduces the charming picturebook world of Dunroamin-on-the-Down, where we meet Jack Idle, the "Buttons" figure. "Hello, boys and girls," calls Jack, and the audience is taught to answer, "Hello, Jack!" There are two pantomime horses, Randy, Jack's faithful friend, and Cherry, companion to Sally Forth (Julia Hills), the village schoolmistress, Principal Girl and heroine, loved by Jack. There is a leggy Principal Boy (Geraldine Gardner), loved by Sally, and the Principal Dame, his mother Lady Dodo (Geoffrey Hutchings). The hero's name is actually Sir Richard Whittington—descendant of the boy who set off for London with his cat to become thrice Lord Mayor of London—and there are innumerable jokes made on the words "dick," "pussy," and "cherry."

These are the characters whose fortunes we follow as their destinies become entangled in the opium trade against the backdrop of the Imperial conflict. Dunroamin has been left "on the down" by a process called industrialization and the whole party goes off to seek Dick's fortune in London-town, where they befriend a vulgar merchant who offers Dick a position in the firm and agrees to take everyone (including the horse) off to India and points east, with a view to making a killing in the opium trade.

There is, throughout the first act, a certain ambivalence toward all the attitudes being satirized. In fact, ambivalence itself seems to be a major theme of the play right up until intermission. It is the kind of satire the English do best, with a biting wit that is partly self-critical and partly self-congratulatory, a humor which seems to say, "We may be narrow-minded and reactionary, but we're so cute when we poke fun at ourselves that it's really all right."

Much sport, for example, is made of Lady Dodo's antiquated attitudes toward the vulgarity of trade and enterprise. But it is the author himself who snidely christens the merchant "Mr. Upward." And Geoffrey Hutchings, when Lady Dodo tries to stop Dick from uttering subversive modern notions of class equality, is seductively funny, whispering urgently, "Pas . . . devant . . . les paysans." He becomes more appealing than ridiculous.

The Principal Dame sings a song lamenting the passing of "Days Gone By," which the Principal Boy answers with a bumps-and-grinds number ("Stop Pining for Days of Yore"). But there is in Lady Dodo's song a mixture of contempt and nostalgia for the old ways which, in the time in which the play is set, are only on the way out, but in the audience's time are quaint echoes of the past. And the heroine sings a kind of ode to ambivalence ("Why Must I?") in which she bemoans her inability to go through life like the creatures of nature without having to make decisions.

Even the form of pantomime itself is the subject of ambivalent satire, a kind of mockery of the whole notion of family entertainment. When Geoffrey Hutchings first enters, he addresses a fictive child in the balcony, tells him to stop fidgeting, and, on being ignored, shoots him dead. Retreating upstage he calls good-naturedly over his shoulder, "I warned you."

Now pantomime is a self-conscious, mildly self-satirical form to begin with. Moreover, much of the satiric force which Nichols attempts to exert in *Poppy* is achieved in the initial concept of using a form that was traditionally light-hearted and patriotic in order to tell the story of a shameful episode in the history of the Empire. That was really all Nichols had to do to get his message across. Not content with this, however, Nichols went on to subvert the pantomime form. With the first half the fun is over; when the curtain rises again the heavy hand of irony descends and the whole production begins to creak under its weight.

The extensive program notes to the play warn us that the Opium Wars were more complicated than a case of simple exploitation and victimization. But Nichols's version of the story reduces the issues to a kind of elemental simplicity, and one of the problems with *Poppy* is that it does not hold much

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interest after the first act. The burden of Nichols's message is so lightweight that the satiric force he exerts seems scarcely necessary. The effect of the extravagant methods which Nichols and the RSC find for simply saying that the British behaved cruelly and immorally seems rather like mowing down a mosquito with a machine gun. When Victoria warbles a Land-of-Hope-and-Glory song ("The Bounty of the Earth") while the Chinese Emperor voices a simple lament for the vanished promise of his son, an opium addict, the message is clear: England was a land of hypocrites and opportunists, but the Chinese were a humane people who cared about their children.

In the second half of the play every innocent convention of pantomime is used to achieve the maximum shock value. Traditional running gags are made gruesome. The "look behind you" joke grows chilling when the objects of pantomime terror are severed heads on spikes poking up periodically from behind a wall. The homosexual love interest becomes shocking when the Principal Boy seduces the Principal Girl in a long, lingering kiss. There follows the discovery of the heroine's birth: she is the illegitimate half-sister of the hero. The heroine never quite recovers from the shock of this revelation and becomes a half-crazed opium addict. There is a sinister mockery of the classic pantomime line as Sally is led offstage with the assurance, "You *shall* go to the ball," and, in a sequence calculated to draw a tear from every eye, Jack shoots the Pantomime Horse because the members of the expedition are starving.

Among the most effectively performed sequences in *Poppy* are one in which Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, appears as a ventriloquist's dummy propped on the knee of a London merchant, another in which the heroine has to be restrained from beating an Indian native to death in righteous indignation at the way he has treated a horse, and a rousing American gospel number in which the Salvation Army lass explains to the opium traders, dealers in death and destruction, why she has no objection to making one of their party: "Civilization, Commerce and Christianity/ All go together, and all begin with C."

There are moments of social and political naïveté here that would be unperformable outside of Great Britain, even supposing that anyone else would want to watch the spectacle of the RSC writhing in a frenzy of national self-criticism. There is an interminable and not particularly clever song sung by the Chinese Court which announces the startling revelation, "They all look the same to us." A New York audience would squirm with embarrassment that in 1982 anyone could think this a new enough idea to make a major musical comedy turn. Rodgers and Hammerstein did that number on race relations thirty years ago.

Yet for all its heavy-handedness, *Poppy,* it appears, is still too subtle for the British in some ways. The ultimate subversion of the pantomime tradition comes in the community-sing sequence. The audience is led in a ditty celebrating the destruction of the Summer Palace at Peking. Down comes the song sheet; the audience is instructed to imitate machine-gunfire with gestures, singing, "Rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat." The audience is divided down the aisle (only there's no aisle at the Barbican and everybody roars with laughter), and the whole theater rings with the happy chorus: "Hip hooray, what a frabjous day/And the Whites won't have to pay/Did you ever see such a glorious dish of Chinese take-away!"

As an American in the audience, I found myself unable to join in the chorus, partly out of natural diffidence—to an American it does seem rather like misbehaving at the theater—but partly because I didn't want to fall for the trick. In order to join in the fun, the audience finds itself singing a racist song. How to impose a little societal guilt in one easy lesson.

I was surprised to find how easily and cheerfully the British joined in singing this chorus and put it down to the influence of the pantomime tradition. Imagine my surprise, however, at hearing a friend exclaim

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with shocked indignation days after seeing the show, "It occurred to me that song they had us sing was racist!" Poor Peter Nichols! To go to all that trouble and still only get his point across belatedly.

But *Poppy* goes beyond the simple statement of anti-imperialism, and Nichols has a message for the British public somewhere below the surface of his text. Throughout the play the idea of enterprise is linked with immorality and destruction. We hear casualty lists of the English, both great and small, who fell under the influence of opium, and we hear catalogues of the waste and destruction in China which the poppy brought, along with sleep and opium dreams, punctuated by the second act's refrain, incessant, like the chimes of a bell: "Too late for the Manchu Dynasty."

"Exploitation," says the hero in Act I, "is not enough. We need free trade!" And what begins as a joke becomes, through constant repetition, a familiar statement: enterprise and free trade equal exploitation. The play ends with the daughter of Tao-Kuan, last of the Manchu Dynasty, confronting the British opium traders beneath a broken rainbow. China, she tells them, is destroyed, "and all for gain. And whose gain?" She turns to the audience: "What's profit, after all?" Curtain.

Could it be that Nichols is offering the British public both the satisfaction of easy self-criticism and a palliative to swallow along with the hardships of Mrs. Thatcher's depressed economy? Not bloody likely. Nichols is really after something else.

In any nation's history there are moments of glory and moments of shame, often compounded and crystallized in myths and legends. Playwrights and poets have always celebrated the moments of glory, presenting angels and devils, villains and victims. Until recently these celebrations were patriotic. *We* were the victims—and ultimately the heroes; *they* were the villains. But our time has seen the rise of a new theme in social drama—anti-patriotism—in those countries only, of course, where it is free to flourish.

If one wants to test the success of *Poppy*'s anti-patriotic message, one need only ask whether it stirs the blood and passions of its audience through its wit or rhetoric. Well, the empire is gone and Nichols's ostensible thesis—that capitalism leads to exploitation, pillaging, murder, and drug abuse—is not very compelling. Indeed, it is not even interesting. How much more eloquent a statement about the sufferings of the small and weak in industrializing England was made by the closing image of *Nicholas Nickleby*: the hero holding out to the audience the body of a starving boy dying in his arms. It is as though *Poppy* takes the closing image of *Nickleby* as a starting point and constructs a new play around that image and that image only. There is no one to identify with in *Poppy* because it presents a world inhabited entirely by villains and fools in which values exist only to be questioned or undercut. Are we meant to identify with the "clever intellectuals" who scoff at pantomime and its simple, clear-cut values or with the "good honest folk" who want to protect the status quo? Presumably with the former.

More than anything else, what one is left with at the end of the evening is a sense of having been bullied into a sort of spiritual complicity with the British intellectual Left. *Poppy* ends by being nothing more than an attack on "bourgois theater." Indeed, by turning the pantomime form into an occasion for sniggering at middle-class values, Nichols is catering to the kind of political hypocrisy that permits the intellectual Left to applaud in the theater a production that derides the life they lead at home.

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Books

The price of distinction

by Robert Langbaum

Twenty years after her death in 1962, the interest continues in Isak Dinesen (the pseudonym for the Danish Baroness Karen Blixen, who wrote almost all her major work in English). In this country all her books are in print; and there appeared last year the English translation of her *Letters from Africa 1914-1931,* which fills in the gaps in her idealized memoir, *Out of Africa* (1937), that minor prose classic of our time. Now, in *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller,* Judith Thurman gives us the second full-scale biography in English of this unusual writer.[1]

Thurman's book is a model of what a literary biography should be; for it is well-researched, but the facts are all absorbed into large patterns of understanding, into a brisk narrative, psychologically profound characterizations, and vivid portrayals of Karen Blixen's Danish and African environments. Thurman has a delicate way of relating the author's life to her stories, of giving biographical readings of the stories that are appropriate to a biography but that do not violate our own non-biographical readings. This biography is as readable as a good novel; indeed, few novelists nowadays would have the imagination or courage to invent so fantastic a life and personality as Karen Blixen's.

The first biography, *Titania,* by Parmenia Migel (1967), gave us much valuable new information. Migel informed us that the young Karen Dinesen (Tanne, as her family called her) fell in love with her future husband's twin brother, who did not respond, before she settled for the slightly less good-looking and dashing Baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke, a Swedish cousin. Migel also hinted, without naming the disease, that Tanne caught syphilis from Bror in Kenya soon after their marriage. But Migel, a high-society friend of Karen's, relied mainly and uncritically on what the aged Baroness told her.

Thurman, instead, has done an impressive job of research. She has mastered the documents in Danish and English; and she has travelled far to interview people who knew Karen Blixen and her circle—people in Denmark, England, and Kenya as well as in the United States. She is above all critical of her sources. She says, for example, that "there are conflicting accounts about the background to this tragic revelation [of syphilis], of Tanne's response to it, and its effect upon her marriage. The story Isak Dinesen told Parmenia Migel in 1960 does not fit the other facts, descriptions, and informed speculations from a variety of reliable sources." She pieces together evidence to support her own theory, to which I shall return later.

In her first chapter Thurman establishes one of the enduring patterns in Tanne's life: the conflict that dominated her mind between the values of her father's family, the aristocratic Dinesens, untitled but related to nobility, and her mother's family, the rich

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bourgeois Westenholzes. Her father, Wilhelm, had had a colorful career as a professional soldier in several wars, a lover, a hunter among American Indians, and finally as a writer and parliamentarian. Using her father as a model, Tanne associated the aristocracy with the sensuous and aesthetic life as opposed to the anti-sensuous, moralistic life of the bourgois Westenholzes. The title of this first chapter, "Either/Or," comes from the title of Kierkegaard's great book on the choice between the aesthetic and the moral life, a book that was to influence Karen Blixen's mature work.

In March 1895, a month before Tanne's tenth birthday, Wilhelm hanged himself. His death made Tanne rebellious against the almost exclusively female Westenholz world in which she now found herself isolated. As a first step toward emulating her father's heroism Tanne would, when she began commuting to Copenhagen to study painting, throw away the daily lunch prepared for her. Her gloomy late adolescence produced her first stories in Danish, stories she began to publish under the American Indian pseudonym of Osceola, another reminder of her father, who had published his well-known two volumes of *Jagtbreve (Letters from the Hunt)* under the American Indian pseudonym of Boganis. She became enamored of the aristocracy; and in her early twenties frequented the smart set which met at the estate of her noble Frijs cousins, where she met the Blixen-Finecke twins. The Westenholzes always objected to Tanne's "snobbery."

Thurman follows earlier critics in showing how Tanne fulfilled what she took to be her father's aristocratic pattern by marrying a baron and living the feudal life in Kenya, where she took as a lover the English nobleman Denys Finch-Hatton. Like her father, she followed a period of adventure (in Africa) with a period of writing; her sympathy for the Africans corresponds to her father's for the American Indians. Her stories, which revive the archaic form of the tale in order to evoke the traditional values of primitives, peasants, and aristocrats, amount to a radical critique of middle-class culture.

Thurman, however, goes farther than anyone in tracing an even deeper psychological pattern deriving from the traumatic loss, with her father's suicide, of the paradisal life in which her father singled her out for long walks in the woods, where he taught her to love the wilderness, physical danger, and an American Indian keenness of the senses which she later identified as a primitive and aristocratic quality. Because he committed suicide, she felt deliberately abandoned; and this feeling led, as she described it in an African letter of August 5, 1926, to a lifelong "horror" of "abandoning one's soul to something that one might come to lose again." The repetition of the trauma in the later loss of her African farm and her lover Denys probably accounts for the emotional power of *Out of Africa* and for the retrospective recasting of the African experience as a paradise lost.

Indeed, as Thurman shows, the irregular attentions of her father, who was seldom home, were to be repeated by her husband, who went and came as he pleased, and by Denys, who visited her for brief periods between trips to England and the safaris which he conducted as a professional hunter. We know from the African letters how she was thrown from ecstasy to despair by Denys's irregular appearances. Her childhood fear of abandonment was tragically fulfilled: by her husband Bror, who walked out on her; by Denys, with whom she quarreled in the end when he insisted on maintaining his independence against her increasingly frantic possessiveness; and by the love of her old age, the young Danish poet Thorkild Bjørnwig, who turned violently against her.

Unfortunately, she had learned from her idealization of her father to associate manliness only with men of action. This led her in her youth to reject the advances of a young literary critic who appreciated her talent and to choose instead a promiscuous animal like Bror, who, as a farm manager, turned out to be good only at making debts. It was after she had caught syphilis from Bror that she came to realize that syphilis was probably

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the reason for her father's suicide. "My father's destiny," she said later, "has, curiously enough, to a great extent, been repeated in my own." She even tried to commit suicide after a quarrel with Denys.

One reason for marrying Bror was to facilitate emigration to Kenya, the land of adventure. Bror emigrated first and, with money provided by Karen's mother, bought land which (it was a sign of his ineptitude) turned out to be too high and acid for coffee-growing; the farm was doomed from the start. He sent for Karen, and they were married in Mombasa on January 14, 1914. For her account of the African years, Thurman relies mainly on *The Letters from Africa*; for *Out of Africa* is too selective, too much a work of art, to be entirely reliable. But Thurman also produces new information based on interviews with people in Kenya who knew the Blixens and Denys. For information on Denys, Thurman uses Errol Trzebinski's biography of him, *Silence Will Speak* (1977), and interviews with Mrs. Trzebinski in Kenya.

If *The Letters from Africa* fill in with realistic details the gaps in *Out of Africa,* Thurman is even more realistic. Both Bror and Denys appear even less attractive in her book than in the *Letters.* Bror's promiscuity, only hinted at in the *Letters,* is amply confirmed here by Thurman's piecing together of evidence, referred to above, suggesting that Bror probably gave Karen syphilis in late 1914 after they had been separated by war missions. "Bror appeared at her camp having spent the night in a Masai [village]. Syphilis was almost epidemic among the Masai." A friend of Bror's remembers that "it was a scandal to everyone that Blixen never hid the fact of his relations with Negro women." Later, when Karen was in Denmark, Bror pawned her furniture and silver to pay debts and is said to have had "orgies [in the house] with Masai women." Yet Karen resisted her family's pressure to divorce him, and they remained friends even after their separation in 1921 and their divorce in 1925. She became angry only when he remarried, thus endangering her

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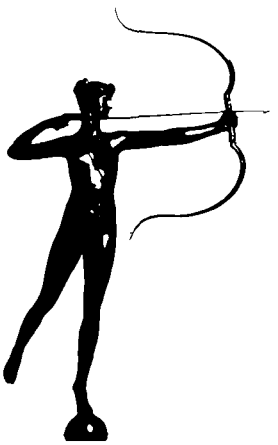

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right to the title to which, however, she clung.

As for Denys, it is clear from the African *Letters* that Karen had an affair with him and not the mere friendship suggested by her circumspection in *Out of Africa*. Thurman confirms the *Letters* by quoting a cable of May 1925 to Denys in England announcing what Karen wrongly thought was the coming of a baby, referred to by the code name Daniel. Denys cold-heartedly replied: "Strongly urge you cancel Daniel's visit." To a lost cable of hers evidently protesting, he replied: "Do as you like about Daniel as I should welcome him if I could offer partnership but this is impossible." Thurman makes clear that their affair began while Karen was still married—and with Bror's acquiescence. The two men were friends, and Bror would introduce Denys proudly as "my wife's lover."

Far from being the roofless vagabond portrayed in *Out of Africa*, Denys was actually a shrewd businessman who bought and sold property in Kenya, owned a string of stores in the Masai Reserve, and later managed several companies. When he finally agreed to give Karen a short-term loan for her ever mounting debts, he had his solicitors write her a tough letter stipulating the conditions. During her last year in Africa, when it became clear that she would have to sell the farm and return to Denmark, Denys's "detachment was absolute." In a letter of October 12, 1930, she calls Denys "a kind of Ariel," adding: "There is a good deal of heartlessness in this temperament." No doubt like so many handsome people a charming narcissist, Denys probably felt as much affection for Karen as he was capable of feeling for anyone. But the love was on her side.

Relations between them were cool when Denys, shortly before she left Africa, died in the crash of the little airplane he owned and piloted. Ironically, as Karen's friend Ingrid Lindstrom told Thurman, Denys's death "gave him back to her again." Everyone treated her as his widow, and she could eternalize their relation in *Out of Africa*.

In one matter, Karen Blixen's relations with the Africans, Thurman's research confirms and even exceeds *Out of Africa* in giving her credit. The man who bought the farm told Thurman that the land, which was not suited to coffee-growing, would have made an "ideal mixed farm," with maize and cattle. "But to do that profitably she would have had to take back her squatters' land, and she wouldn't touch it . . . . Instead, she ran the coffee, and the Africans made the profit," ending up with three thousand head of cattle. Thurman also learned that Karen Blixen's feat, after she had lost the farm and Denys, in securing for her squatters enough land in the Kikuyu Reserve so they could stay together, was even more miraculous than it appears in *Out of Africa*. The Governor finally agreed only because he pitied her.

It was not, as one might expect, the syphilis that broke up the Blixens' marriage. It was the Westenholzes' insistence that Bror be excluded from the administration of the farm, in which they held the stocks, that caused Bror to walk out on her. Karen did not mind the syphilis—the cause of increasing suffering the rest of her life—as much as other people thought she should. She could write to her brother Thomas in 1926: "If it did not sound so beastly I might say that the world being as it is, it was worth having syphilis in order to become a Baroness."

She accepted the disease as the heroic suffering she had been looking for—as the necessary price for distinction in life and art, the price paid for creativity. For among the syphilitics, says Thurman, "were her father, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, the demonic heroes and fallen angels of Romanticism." The syphilis made her feel satanic, in touch with life's forbidden depths. In her old age she said to the young poet Bjørnwig, "I promised the devil my soul, and in return he promised me that everything I was going to experience hereafter would be turned into tales." One of the patterns Thurman subtly traces is Karen Blixen's lifelong opposition to Christian dualism in favor of the idea that "God and the Devil are one," an idea

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she considered to be African and artistic.

In a story dealing with syphilis ("The Cardinal's Third Tale," *Last Tales,* 1957), Lady Flora Gordon is a beautiful, aristocratic, Scottish giantess, who loathes the flesh and all physical contact; her size externalizes her feeling that she has too much body. She is saved when, at St. Peter's in Rome, she contracts syphilis by kissing the foot of St. Peter's statue, just after it has been kissed by a plebeian young man who left the spot "warm" and "slightly moist." The syphilis makes her a better and happier woman by connecting her with other people, by eradicating her isolating sense of purity. If we read the story biographically, we must wonder why Isak Dinesen gave her heroine syphilis without the attendant pleasures of sexual intercourse. Can it be that the author, who did contract syphilis through intercourse, never really enjoyed sex? The possibility would account for her many stories about impotent men and frigid women who can participate in sex only vicariously.

Thurman finally tracks down the medical details of Karen's syphilis, giving the nature, places, and dates of her treatments on trips back to Denmark, and explaining that she was rendered non-infectious but not cured. She had syphilis of the spine, which does not affect the mind, but which accounts for the operations on her spine in 1946 and 1955 and for the fact that she had to dictate much of her later work lying on the floor. The syphilis and an ulcer which caused most of her stomach to be cut out made it impossible for her to eat. Although she turned even this disability into a triumph of style by announcing that she lived on oysters and champagne, the fact is that she died of malnutrition. She kept going, as Thurman reveals, on amphetamines, which made possible her brilliant American tour in early 1959 when—a frail wisp of a woman weighing seventy pounds—she told her stories to packed houses. The tour landed her in a New York hospital.

The surprising success of *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934) in the United States and the success everywhere of *Out of Africa* (1937) made Isak Dinesen, less than ten years after her return to Denmark, a famous writer, a contender for the Nobel Prize. The self-portraiture in *Out of Africa* turned her into a mythical personage, as interesting for her personal legend as for her art. At Rungstedlund, the family estate which she continued to inhabit after her mother's death, she began in 1948 to hold court to a circle of young Danish writers. Of these she chose for the love of her old age the talented young poet Thorkild Bjørnwig.

Thurman's account of this fantastic affair relies on Bjørnwig's account of it in *Pagten* (*The Pact,* 1974). The affair shows Karen at her most satanic—first because it is played out psychically, without sexual consummation. She told Bjørnwig that her syphilis had cut her off "from life, not only from the Erotic, but had made any physical contact taboo"—a statement which makes us wonder about the effect of the syphilis on her affair with Denys. The affair was also satanic in that she was meddling in someone else's life, trying to make Bjørnwig over in her own image, as a great poet, and into the image of Wilhelm and Denys as an aristocratic hero. He was to suffer, to be hard—ruthlessly amoral in the pursuit of self-realization, even if this meant abandoning his wife and child and taking a mistress. Their affair cooled off when Bjørnwig did in fact take a mistress, but for a while kept the relation secret from her. She might not have minded had she been permitted to participate vicariously in the sexual relation, to stage-manage it as part of the script she was writing for Bjørnwig.

She ritualized their affair by making him call her Baroness, while she called him Magister. Their affair began with a pact which, when the affair cooled off, she offered to renew by mixing their blood, a procedure from which he recoiled. He finally wrote her a letter renouncing her satanic power over him. These episodes are represented in "Echoes" *(Last Tales),* in which the former opera star Pellegrina trains a peasant boy to become a great singer like herself. He

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renounces her as "a witch" and "vampire" when, to teach him courage, she pricks three of his fingertips with a needle, wiping the drops of blood off on her handkerchief and lifting the handkerchief to her lips. What comes through "Echoes" and Thurman's account is Karen's genuine love of Bjørnwig and her desire that their affair have a grandeur that, as often before in her life, the other person was incapable of living up to. Her demonic quality, so often found in great artists, derived from her generous desire that life yield more than it can yield; she needed art for the rest. But her mistake, as she realizes in "Echoes" and "The Immortal Story" (*Anecdotes of Destiny,* 1958), was to lose sight of the distinction between life and art.

For all her acknowledgment of Karen Blixen's faults, Thurman's portrayal gives us in its total effect a woman who was too vital, intelligent, and imaginative to be merely *nice*, whose personal power was such that it could turn destructive when not satisfied through a feudal relation, as with her Africans, or through absorption in artistic endeavor. Although Thurman came upon the scene too late to have known Karen Blixen, she understands her remarkably well —as I who knew her somewhat can testify. Thurman ends by citing a solitary sentence on a pad found on Karen Blixen's desk shortly before her death: *"forfeited my claim to a real human life."* The sentence sums up the link Karen Blixen saw between her life and her work, the price she paid for her art. The sentence seems also to relate to her story about Byron ("The Second Meeting," *Last Tales*), whose career, like hers, had its heroic and artistic sides. She ends the story by saying that Byron's enduring creation will be not his poems but his life. Judith Thurman's biography, instead, shows that Karen Blixen created for herself a life and personality not more but certainly as complexly fascinating as her art.

Mexico at the movies

Carl J. Mora Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1980. University of California Press, 287 pages, $29.50

reviewed by Mark Falcoff

This book is an excursion to a far country—not the Mexico of geographic proximity, but of popular imagination. *That* country can only be visited in a darkened motion-picture theater, where a society consciously or unconsciously projects its hopes and fears onto the screen. In an important sense, then, Carl Mora, a Mexican-American scholar and editor of distinction, has vindicated both as an art form and as a social document one of the most vigorous film literatures in Latin America and indeed the world. That such vindication is necessary at all indicates that there is something of a problem with film criticism in Mexico and elsewhere, including, unfortunately, at our own universities.

Insofar as the Mexican film industry is concerned—or, for that matter, Mexico itself—the state of public knowledge in this country is so sparse that it would be asking too much for a book of this sort to be a "critical history." Rather, it is a catalogue raisonné arranged in chronological order, embellished with some remarks on the economic and political environment in which the industry has had to develop. This presents some problems, as we shall see. Nonetheless, there are a number of interesting things going on in this book.

First, Mora is using film history to hold up to American readers a (for them) new and different face of Mexico—a face that may occasionally repel but that will not fail to be of interest. Second, he is carrying on a quiet but persistent debate with Mexican "intellectuals" and critics (and to some degree, with himself as well), who have traditionally dismissed their country's commercially successful industry as escapist and irrelevant to national problems. And, finally, he is trying to sort out the relationships between a supposedly revolutionary govern-

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ment and an increasingly state-controlled film industry, and between both of these and the finished product.

Though it may surprise many North Americans, the cinema in Mexico is very nearly as old as it is in this country. The same primitive devices introduced by the brothers Lumière in Paris quickly found their way to Mexico City, and by 1900 the Mexicans were making precursors of the modern newsreel. By the First World War, production shifted to silent dramas, mostly based on plots from the Spanish and Italian lyric theater. During the 1920s, the infant Mexican industry was hard put to compete with American exports, which—still silent—required a minimum of repackaging for exhibition abroad. The coming of sound in 1929 redressed the balance somewhat in favor of the Mexican domestic product, and of course opened up a potentially vast export market.

It was in the 1930s and 1940s that Mexican cinema, like that of the United States, found its own distinctive style. The principal genres were the *comedia ranchera* (a sort of Mexican version of the singing cowboy film), family melodramas, historical-patriotic epics, the comedies of Mario Moreno ("Cantinflas"), and, finally, in the 1950s, *cabaretera* films set in the demimonde of prostitution and night life in Mexico City, Veracruz, and Acapulco. In the late 1960s a more manifestly political cinema aimed at the European and Latin American film festivals (and a presumptively leftist Third World public) was fostered under the protection of Luis Echevarría (who governed from 1970 to 1976). After a long and painful battle over both the artistic and financial results, however, the industry retreated to what Mora calls "packaged formulas" and "commercialism."

Mora shows that almost all of the films made over these last fifty years have possessed political content of some sort—even the glossy, superficial *comedias rancheras,* which deliberately evoked the supposed harmonies of rural life in pre-revolutionary Mexico. The comedies of Cantinflas, in both his early and middle periods, held up to merciless ridicule all the authority and social pretension embodied in self-important bureaucrats and "educated" people in general. And even the most tasteless examples of the *cabaretera* genre displayed the shortcomings of Mexico's economy and society.

The constant popularity of Hollywood films in Mexico (as almost everywhere else in the world) has by no means prevented Mexicans from developing their own cinematic idiom. One need only read a few of the several dozen plots Mora painstakingly reconstructs to find oneself on unfamiliar terrain, where the dominant features are violence, the cheapness of human life, a morbid approach to sexuality and human relationships generally, the centrality of family life to the utter exclusion of all other reference groups in society, and, finally, the tension between traditional and modern values, itself the oldest and most persistent theme in Mexican history.

While "formula" or "package" films have done far better at the box office than a more seriously artistic, or, if one will, leftist intellectual cinema, the relationship is by no means simple and direct. Some leftist films made in the Echevarría period did quite well financially—although it should be added that more popular (and financially successful) genres have sometimes reached very high levels of artistic achievement. This mixed result should not surprise us: the success of a motion picture is due to many things, including, needless to say, its audience appeal.

Here, unfortunately, Mora introduces a note of confusion. At one point he attributes the basically conservative tone of Mexican cinema to either the postures of Mexican governments or the supposed dominance of the "bourgeois" film-going public. But at another point he admits that the film medium in Mexico has always been a popular rather than strictly middle-class form of entertainment. People—even, or perhaps especially, the poor—vote with their pocketbooks. Could it be that the poor are more

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conventional in their tastes than the critics who presume to speak for them?

This brings us to the relationship between the Mexican government and the film industry. Almost from the very beginning there was official apprehension that North American studios or investors might seize a controlling interest in the local industry. It was precisely to forestall this outcome that the Banco Cinematográfico was created in 1942 to finance national productions. The following year RKO failed to acquire a major share of the new (and now mammoth) Churubusco studios. One other attempt in the late 1940s by former U. S. Consul William O. Jenkins (in league with, among others, the brother of President Manuel Avila Camacho [1940-46]) also came to naught, even though at one point Jenkins managed to extend his influence into both distribution and financing. Instead, the Mexican government gradually acquired a majority interest in both the studios and the Banco Cinematográfico, to such a point that it would be no exaggeration to say that for many years now the Mexican industry has been virtually nationalized. Thus, if one finds the product itself less than perfect, inevitably one must address oneself to certain political realities.

This seems to me to be the least successful part of Mora's book—and I think I know why. Mexicans, especially Mexican-Americans, have a vested interest in what has often been called the Myth of the Revolution—the notion that since 1910 their country (or the country of their ancestors) has been moving in the direction of social justice and national dignity, exemplified particularly by the agrarian reforms of the 1920s and 1930s and the recuperation of petroleum resources from foreign ownership in 1938.

Behind this rather blurred view of recent history lies one inconvenient fact: most of the governments generated by the Mexican Revolution have not been notably revolutionary. Even that of General Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), which symbolizes for Mora (and others) the apogee of the movement, is now being re-evaluated by a new generation of historians who find that period much more revolutionary in rhetoric and in style than in actual fact.

It is not especially illuminating merely to compare the content of films with the substance of the governments under which they were made, as Mora does. True, a few excellent "social" films were made under Cárdenas—but, after all, this was the 1930s, and the cultural scene in Mexico City was not immune to the currents which swept through many Western capitals. More to the point, it was during this very same period that the Mexican industry launched *Allá en rancho grande* (1936), the first *comedia ranchera* that for all its supposed reactionary qualities commenced a cycle of truly national films, films that won a major share for Mexico in Central and South American markets. Conversely, whatever one may think of the leftist films made during the Echevarría period, they hardly reflected a fundamental shift in the direction of Mexican society. At best, they registered a "cultural" dimension to the President's campaign to elevate himself to a new international dignity as leader of the Third World (and possibly to the office of Secretary General of the United Nations).

At times Mora is deft in delineating the real issues behind the content of Mexican films—one of which is to make money (i.e., avoid boring audiences to death). In this sense, the debates he records between commercially minded producers and intellectually committed film enthusiasts sound—stripped of their peculiar ideological garb—very familiar indeed. But occasionally, perhaps without realizing it, he succumbs to the vulgar Marxist fallacies he is otherwise at pains to avoid.

Where his own cinematic tastes are concerned, Mora is wonderfully ecumenical. He recalls with frank nostalgia an adolescence spent in the old Belmont Theater, the original Spanish-language house in New York, where he first "became aware of the multi-leveled, complex cultural and social nature of Latin American society. This, I realize," he adds, "goes against detractors' comments

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on the 'old' Latin American cinema, which dismiss it as some kind of cultural-imperialist tool, designed to deaden the progressive political instincts of the people with an unending cycle of tacky melodramas." He clearly prefers the social cinema of the 1930s and to some degree also the more recent efforts under President Echevarría, particularly the work of Chilean émigré director Miguel Littín, but he knows how to appreciate some of the more popular genres as well.

Every film historian has the right to select the works he regards as important, so perhaps no reviewer has the right to call him to order. Nonetheless, one cannot help wondering why so little space is dedicated to Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950), or why no mention at all is made of two really exceptional films made in the mid-Sixties, *Los caifanes* and *Pedro Páramo*. *Los caifanes* treats of a young society couple who decide to spend a night slumming the night spots of the Mexican lumpenproletariat. In the process it manages to cast light on all of the important social and cultural issues which rend contemporary Mexican society. As for *Pedro Páramo*, there is simply no film that so graphically evokes the real meaning of the Revolution for those who lived it in the ranches and villages of the north-central part of the country. (It stars our present Ambassador to Mexico, John Gavin, in a Spanish-speaking role.)

These two films alone suggest that the Mexican film industry, with all of its problems, is even better than Mora claims it to be. This having been said, the many merits of *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1980* remain. Mora's book is obviously the fruit of remarkable dedication and patience—the work of many years, including what must have been literally thousands of hours in screening rooms. The result, for us, is a new window on Mexico, a country so many Americans like to think they know. That, indeed, is no small contribution.

The possessed

John Putnam Demos Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England. Oxford University Press, 543 pages, $25

reviewed by Peter Shaw

In 1953 in *The Crucible* playwright Arthur Miller seized upon the guilt that has always attached to the Salem witch hunt to make a contemporary parallel with militant anti-Communism. He implied that Salem was the source of a continuing battle between those in America who attempt to stifle free-thinking dissent and their victims among the good, common people. More than anything else the notion that dissenters represent a beleaguered class lent *The Crucible* its ideological thrust—one that has sustained it as a popular international repertory item for some thirty years. And yet, as Robert Warshow and other critics forcefully demonstrated at the time, both Miller's interpretation of American society and his historical analogies failed to stand up to scrutiny.

Miller's emphasis on victimization, it was evident, could be maintained on stage only by altering the characters and motivations of his historical models (something Miller claimed scrupulously not to have done). For the truth was that the New England clergy and magistrates whom he described as having displayed "an absolute dedication to evil" acted for the most part to calm and ameliorate popular passions. The roles of the common people and the authorities, in other words, were largely the reverse of what Miller described.

In the thirty years since *The Crucible*, scholarly investigations have enormously complicated the picture, but each of them has served further to undermine the main popular tradition drawn on by Miller—that the Salem hysteria left an evil residue in American history. The piling up of evidence, however, has not prevented certain scholars from paying lip service to the notion that the spirit of Salem hysteria lives on.

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In *Witchcraft at Salem* (1969), for example, Chadwick Hansen offered the first balanced, comparative account of the Salem episode. He showed that by seventeenth-century standards the evidence that supernatural crimes were being committed was overwhelming. There *were* practicing witches in New England—people who believed themselves in contact with the invisible world and able to harness it to do harm to others. Moreover, those who imagined themselves to be victims of the witches were truly "possessed." This is to say that they suffered genuine torments, and that most of them honestly believed these to be administered by witches. Their fits were accompanied by physical symptoms that included the spontaneous appearance of physical marks exactly where they felt themselves being pricked. Their symptoms and behavior, Hansen showed, were typical of modern cases of extreme hysteria observed under clinical conditions.

Yet the New England courts, despite the apparently unmistakable evidences of witchcraft set before them, consistently acquitted far more witches than they convicted. Fifty people confessed to being witches in Salem, but thirty of them were never convicted (in the end twenty out of hundreds accused were found guilty and executed). Outside of Salem, sixteen witches were executed in America during the seventeenth century, and none thereafter. In France during the same period, Hansen pointed out, "approximately nine hundred witches were burned in the single city of Bamber, and approximately five thousand in the single province of Alsace." It can be added that by some estimates five hundred thousand people were burned as witches between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, most of them being first subjected to dreadful tortures. (In America witches were sometimes mistreated but never tortured.)

Hansen logically concluded that America's was "a genuinely exemplary record." In *Salem Possessed* (1974), Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum agreed. They concluded that the Salem incident took place in a context of exceptional legal and political circumstances. The witches did not receive fair trials by modern standards, but given "a society confronted with a tenacious outbreak of a particularly baffling crime at a time of severe political and legal disruption" the proceedings were "a remarkable testament" to the fairness and good sense of the magistrates. Yet, America's exemplary record notwithstanding, Hansen ended his book, as Boyer and Nissenbaum did *not* end theirs, by pronouncing that "the spirit of the witch hunt is still with us."

In *Entertaining Satan,* John Demos adds importantly to our understanding of witchcraft by reconstituting the New England culture out of which it grew. His *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (1970), reconstituted the life of a small New England community as a microcosm of Puritan society. Demos's exemplary use of local records helped establish social history as a dominant historical approach in this country—thus giving us a technique of close reading equivalent to that employed by the French *annales* school usually associated with the names of Fernand Braudel and Lucien Febvre. In undertaking the study of witchcraft, Demos might have been expected to focus again on a single community, this time Salem, the records of which are more full than those of other New England communities of the time. Instead he has chosen to take all of New England witchcraft as his subject, and only barely to touch on Salem. (It may be that he felt it unnecessary to go over Boyer and Nissenbaum's work, much of which built upon Demos's own important essay of 1970: "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth Century New England.") The first half of *Entertaining Satan* continues the kind of close analysis with which Demos has been associated, and extends the technique deep into personal psychology. The second half looks at New England culture from a broad, sociological perspective and offers theories on the social causation of witchcraft.

Demos is at his best when capturing New

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England life in its everyday reality: the trading of goods and services, the casual visits next door, the daily gossip over the fence. He shows how these exchanges can reveal the petty jealousies, resentments, and personality clashes that often lay behind witchcraft accusations.

Taken together, Demos's findings give the richest psychological picture of witchcraft to date. He describes a web of "psychic complicity" among the accused witches, their victims, and their accusers—all of whom were likely to be close neighbors. The accused tended to be not old, as has usually been supposed, but middle-aged women between the ages of forty and sixty. These women were often psychological misfits who had suffered reversals in life, had remained childless, and were prone to quarreling with their neighbors. Their possessed "victims" were usually teen-aged girls or young men in their twenties. Accusations of witchcraft were often made by one middle-aged woman, possibly menopausal, against another.

One can only touch on some of Demos's fascinating speculations on these evidences of the intimate psychology of witchcraft, and then only at the risk of caricaturing a subtle, persuasively constructed argument. A Puritan woman in menopause, he points out, had in effect been robbed of something by an unseen force. In extreme situations she might find a personification of that force in a neighbor whose barrenness or widowhood gave her good symbolic reasons for wanting to meddle with someone else's fertility. Young men in their twenties projected their psychological uncertainties over assuming the responsibilities of adulthood on the same women, who for them represented tormenting "women of their mother's generation." Young girls imagined themselves being urged to sign the devil's "pact" by such women, or by the Devil himself, at a time when they were absorbed with the impending prospect of signing a marriage "pact of perpetual allegiance."

Demos goes on to suggest—problematically but intriguingly—that these imagined victims of witchcraft suffered specifically from narcissistic disturbances. When he leaves the micro-level of analysis where he is a master, however, and begins to deal with the whole of Puritan society, the outlines of a questionable indictment begin to appear. First he suggests that "New Englanders seem to have felt vulnerable in their core sense of self," a formulation that has the familiar ring of critiques directed against the "narcissistic" 1970s. He then traces their problem to the notorious repression of Puritan society, which is said to have given rise to a "narcissistic rage." This rage, which represented "the whole dark underside of early New England character," was directed away from society and deflected onto witchcraft. The result was that witchcraft came to serve society as a means of "social control."

The implication seems to be that the ultimate guilt for witchcraft lay with society. Society is further indicted by Demos's alternate, social theory of witchcraft. Here he traces the blame to "emergent mercantile capitalism," a social factor that Boyer and Nissenbaum found important. But where they traced the psychological strains underlying witchcraft hysteria to the stresses of the *transition* from Puritan cooperation to modern, capitalist individualism, Demos singles out the new spirit itself, calling it "individualism with a vengeance." This not only makes society responsible but has the effect of forging a link of guilt with the twentieth century, which is of course the descendant and current representative of that individualism. Yet Demos's own description of the social evolution and "economic and occupational diversification" of a town in which witchcraft died out early—Weathersfield, Connecticut—seems to indicate not that the capitalistic forces contributed to the spread of witchcraft superstition but rather that they hastened its eradication.

Outside of the few passages that look at the seventeenth century in an unfavorable light, the overall impression in *Entertaining Satan* is of a work whose subtleties of analysis militate against narrowly accusational views. No single psychological or social type

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and no one class is made responsible for the scattered instances of witchcraft fears that broke out in New England. And even the idea of a repressive society as the ultimate agent of these fears is mediated by a lively sense of the crucial local and personal variables that were always at play. After all, repression or no repression, many towns never suffered a witchcraft incident.

It is particularly unfortunate, therefore, that at the very end of his study Demos, like Hansen, suddenly delivers a sweeping, and to my mind unthinking indictment. He writes that with regard to Jews, Catholics, atheists, Communists, and others, witch-hunting has been "repeatedly revived all through American history. The long and continuing life of the *metaphor* itself bespeaks an underlying connection" (his italics). But frequent recourse to a metaphor hardly proves the existence of a reality, though it can indicate the persistence of an attitude—in this case one of self-induced guilt. By suddenly switching to this attitude, Demos seems to throw the mantle of Arthur Miller's belief in continuous American guilt over his own theories of social control and emergent mercantile capitalism.

Demos's dubious homily is delivered more as ritual than as argument, and it cannot seriously mar an otherwise exemplary work of scholarship. But it does reflect a part of the general problem scholars seem to have when they confront the phenomenon of witchcraft. American historians might be expected to ask how New Englanders managed to avoid the enormities committed during the European and English witchcraft crazes. Instead they have linked this country's witchcraft record to a putative tradition of intolerance throughout American history. In doing so they have added yet another element to the riddle of American witchcraft. For now one's perplexities over the nature of the phenomenon itself are matched by wonderment at its ability to possess historians with an enduring conviction of guilt.

Thinking big

John Updike Bech Is Back. Knopf, 165 pages, 13.95

reviewed by John Podhoretz

Henry Bech is a celebrated, blocked American-Jewish novelist and the subject of two John Updike short-story collections, *Bech: A Book* (1970) and now *Bech Is Back*. Both volumes are satirical portraits of American literary life, and because that life has undergone drastic alteration since the 1960s *Bech Is Back* is not simply a sequel to *Bech: A Book*. In fact, the new work differs in surprising and often unsettling ways from its predecessor, and manages to tell us a great deal about Updike himself.

Bech: A Book begins with a letter "written" to Updike by the eponymous protagonist; Updike has apparently asked his character for a blessing on the book's publication. Bech evaluates Updike's performance as follows: "At first blush, . . . I sound like some gentlemanly Norman Mailer; then that . . . glimpse of *silver* hair glints more of gallant, glamorous Bellow, the King of the Leprechauns . . . . My childhood seems out of Alex Portnoy and my ancestral past out of I.B. Singer. I get a whiff of Malamud . . . and am I paranoid to feel my 'block' an ignoble version of the more or less noble renunciations of H. Roth, D. Fuchs, and J. Salinger?" Thus Updike makes it clear from the very first page that Bech is not merely *an* American-Jewish novelist, but *the* American-Jewish novelist, a distillation and condensation of those writers who had dominated American fiction in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Bech supports himself during his writer's block by lecturing at colleges and traveling for the USIA; indeed, we never even spend time with him in his Upper West Side apartment. In every story but the last, Bech is off somewhere, in Russia or in London or in West Virginia. He is, evidently, homeless, alienated, absent, and so, by implication, are the writers he represents.

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Bech's reputation is based on his first novel, *Travel Light,* "a minor classic of the Fifties, along with *Picnic, The Search for Bridey Murphy,* and the sayings of John Foster Dulles." *Travel Light* sounds, from Updike's descriptions of it, like a disastrous blend of *The Adventures of Augie March,* "The White Negro," and "Howl." Its main characters are a group of motorcycling Candides who express their freedom from the bourgeois life by robbing and raping middle-class matrons in Ohio.

Bech's literary paralysis, we are led to understand, is the result of the hostile reception of his two later novels, *Brother Pig* and *The Chosen:* "His id," Updike writes, "in collaboration with the superego figures of Dwight MacDonald and Alfred Kazin, had successfully reduced him to artistic impotence." In addition, he has long been an eclectic essayist: in the Fifties he "wormed his way into the quarterlies. *Commentary* let him use a desk . . . . He reviewed books, any history, mysteries, almanacs, pornography—anything printed had magic." And his devotion to the quarterlies paid off in full, for the contributors to them are responsible for his reputation. The book ends with a bibliography of Bech's writings and writings about Bech, among them George Steiner's "Candide as Schlemiel," Stanley Edgar Hyman's "Bech Zeroes In," John Thompson's "So Bad It's Good," and Richard Gilman's "Bech, Gass, and Nabokov: The Territory Beyond Proust."

This is all brilliant and funny. Updike's handling of his tricky subject matter is often inspired, in the manner of, say, an Edward Koren cartoon in *The New Yorker,* in which an entire class of people is captured with a rough line drawing of a dinner party and an appropriate caption. Just as Bech is a cartoon version of the American-Jewish novelist, *Bech: A Book* is a cartoon sendup of the New York Jewish literary world of the 1950s and 1960s.

And yet, despite the apparent good spirits motivating *Bech: A Book,* there is a disturbing undercurrent in Updike's portrait of the American-Jewish literary figure. What was so dazzling and refreshing about the Jewish writers Updike names in the introductory passage was precisely that they were not alienated as Bech seems to be. In fact, their writing was an explosion of the myth of the Wandering Jew that Updike consciously resuscitates. Bellow, Henry Roth, Philip Roth, and Daniel Fuchs are *American* writers whose work was greeted in the 1950s and 1960s with the hosannas Updike caricatures in his bibliographical appendix because they were contributing a new language and a new spirit to American fiction. Their books were loud proclamations that American Jews were now fully American. And their writings have in fact been remarkably different from one another, as different novels about Americans in different classes and situations tend to be. By turning the American Jewish novelists into Daniel Derondas, Updike is discounting what was most distinctive in their writings. By creating a single character meant to stand for all American-Jewish writers, Updike is saying, in effect, "You guys are all alike."

Though *Bech: A Book* was acclaimed at the time of its publication for its "insider's view" of the literary scene, the world Updike chronicles in the book was in truth a world he was not a part of. Many of the critics who praise Bech so warmly—like MacDonald, Kazin, and Leslie Fiedler—were not admirers of Updike's work. Fiedler, for example, once called Updike "a strangely irrelevant writer," and this seemed to be the general consensus among the "highbrow" critics. (There were of course exceptions, Mary McCarthy being the most prominent one.) *Bech: A Book* can therefore be read as an answer to these critics, for by parodying those writers the highbrows made famous he was parodying the highbrows as well. *Bech: A Book* is a work that leaves a sharp taste of sour grapes.

The literary landscape has changed markedly since the publication of *Bech: A Book.* The American-Jewish novelist has ceased to be as important a figure in the world of American fiction as he was in Updike's youth, while

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Updike is everywhere acclaimed. After a slight dip in the early Seventies, Updike's reputation has risen steadily, reaching its apex with the reception of his last two novels, *The Coup* and *Rabbit Is Rich*.

This last phenomenon is not hard to account for. Updike's writings are unfailingly polite, unfailingly serious, and unfailingly dirty. As a chronicler of suburban Angst and American sexual problems, Updike can turn an extra-marital fling in a Caribbean hotel room into a poetical struggle of metaphysical significance. He endows his characters with a vision so microscopic that they can see a drop of dew on a flower; their perceptivity is so acute that the lifting of an eyebrow signals the end of a marriage. Moreover, however tawdry the character of modern life in his novels may be, Updike wraps his description of it in elaborately "literary" prose. Collectively, his books say to his audience: "Your problems are the stuff of tragedy and literature; your lives are important." Saul Bellow may have won the Nobel Prize, but one gets the impression that Updike is the writer who speaks most clearly and directly to the influential reviewers now at work.

It would seem, then, that now Updike can afford to be generous to Bech, and in fact he is. *Bech Is Back* is a much gentler work than its predecessor. It reads, as the first did not, like a novel. Bech is still traveling, but as we meet up with him again his journeys have become increasingly unsatisfying. In the book's third story, "Australia and Canada," Bech, a perennial bachelor, has two sexual encounters so horribly similar that they finally propel him into marriage with his suburban, Gentile mistress. Together he and his wife go to Israel and Scotland; she becomes passionate about the Holy Land, while in Scotland he quietly condemns her Scottish descent by talking about the Clearances of the eighteenth century and comparing them to the Holocaust. The marriage is doomed to failure, but in her Ossining home Bech suddenly becomes productive again. He writes a massive novel called *Think Big* about the television industry. By dint of its own pornographic excesses and his position as the most legendarily stifled writer in the country, the novel becomes an enormous critical and commercial success.

The real surprise of *Bech Is Back* concerns Bech himself. There are no more glimpses of Bellow or whiffs of Malamud. Instead, Updike has made a real effort here to make a character out of Bech. However, since his creation was so much a caricature to begin with, the cartoonish aspect still remains. While Bech's witticisms are often good—when asked what he means by the phrase "American writer," Bech responds: "I mean any person who simultaneously writes and holds American citizenship"—they always seem like captions.

When Updike turns to *Think Big* and to the response it engenders, he writes like an expert. *Think Big* reminds one of John Irving's *The World According to Garp* and William Gaddis's *J.R.* (and it is a measure of how different the new book is from the old that these models are the products of Gentile writers), and Updike's cool descriptions of it are the highpoints of *Bech Is Back:*

> Thelma marvels at herself, that she could ever sleep with a man who sleeps with that spoiled and pouting parody of a woman, whose money (made by her father in meatpacking) was at the root of everything. She laughs, and prods with a disrespectful forefinger Tad's drenched shirtfront of ribbed Egyptian cotton. His stomach is spongy; there comes by contrast into her mind the taut body of her slender Olive, their gentle mutual explorations in that exiguous, triangular West Side apartment . . . .
>
> "You were thinking of that other bitch," Tad has shrewdly surmised . . . .
>
> "You big pig," she tells Tad with that self-contempt of women which is their dearest and darkest trait, "I love your shit."

The critical reception is equally well-observed:

> "The squalid book we all deserve," said Alfred Kazin in the *New York Times Book Review*. "A beguilingly festive disaster," decreed John

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> Leonard in the daily *Times*. "Not quite as *vieux chapeau* as I had every reason to fear," allowed Gore Vidal in the *New York Review of Books*. "Yet another occasion for rejoicing that one was born a woman," proclaimed Ellen Willis in the *Village Voice*. "An occasion for guarded wonder," boomed Benjamin De Mott in *Partisan Review*, "that puts us in grateful mind of Emerson's admonition, 'Books are the best of all things, well used; abused, among the worst.'" . . . Bech was photographed by Jill Krementz, caricatured by David Levine, and interviewed by Michiko Kakutani . . . .

Considering the raw material of *Think Big* as well as its real-world progenitors, the satirical parts of *Bech Is Back* are much more palatable than those of its predecessor. They do not redeem the book as a whole—for besides the difficulties with Updike's new conception of Bech, the travelogues are dispirited and deadly to read—but they do exude a pleasantly catty feeling.

One wonders, however, just who it is that Updike is lampooning here. For while it is certainly true that a real-life Bech would receive this sort of attention, there are stark parallels between Bech's success with *Think Big* and Updike's successes with most of his novels. Updike, too, has been caricatured by David Levine, many times, in fact; and before the publication of *Bech Is Back* he was interviewed twice by Michiko Kakutani. The litany of praise for *Think Big* might have been lifted from the back cover of any Updike paperback. Indeed, Updike has said that he incorporated many of his own experiences as a successful author into these tales.

There is something discomfiting in this, and it comes from Updike's blithe, omniscient tone in these stories. Updike is parodying the decline in literary standards and the rush towards the newest thing in literary fashion. But it seems never to have occurred to him that his own celebrity and position as a major American writer may well be a product of this decline and this rush. In *Bech Is Back* he ridicules those who are responsible for *his* reputation, and the reasons for this are not clear, to the reader.

Bech: A Book was, as we have seen, understandably splenetic: Updike seemed to have good reasons for disliking the highbrow critics. Now, however, most of those critics are dead or they have turned to more frivolous literary interests. Is it because of the change in the literary atmosphere that Updike has seen fit to revivify Henry Bech and use him as a stick to beat the reviewers who *do* so much admire him now? Could it be that he is attacking Leonard et al. for not being MacDonald et al.? Could it be that he misses that now vanished world of *Partisan Review* and the highbrows? I think the reappearance of so dated a character as Henry Bech suggests that he does, since those writers upon whom Bech was originally based received the praise he apparently coveted and still covets, praise he was never to receive from them. Despite his great success, Updike still wants in.

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Fiction chronicle

Spirits in the material world

by Joshua Gilder

In his well-known essay on William Dean Howells, Lionel Trilling remarked that for us today the nineteenth-century family seems an elaborate hoax; to the contemporary sensibility, he said, family life is part of "inadequate bourgeois reality." By the evidence of the current literary season, bourgeois reality, in several of its manifestations, is still a source of dissatisfaction among the literary intelligentsia. Several novelists, however, are offering corrective measures. Don DeLillo's latest novel, *The Names,*[1] is perhaps the most ambitious in this regard, rendering the whole idea of reality moot.

In a review of his fifth novel, *Players,* Diane Johnson, a great admirer of DeLillo's, speaks of his use of terrorists as "moral agents." Terrorist action, she explains, "is not so much an example of lawlessness as a comment on the rules, an aspect of the culture itself." Terrorists are still very much on DeLillo's mind in *The Names,* though the focus of their attack, or "comment" as Johnson would have it, has shifted from the bourgeoisie to the structure of language, which has perhaps come to be seen as a bourgeois institution.

The narrator of *The Names,* James Axton, is a cross between an existentialist and corporate man. A former free-lance writer, he has separated from his wife and now does risk analysis for a company that insures multi-national corporations against the hazards of their trade: assassinations, military coups, religious fanaticism, etc. In the end he's terribly disillusioned to find that his company has been passing on its information, most of it a matter of public record anyway, to the CIA. But the heart of the book concerns Axton's increasing obsession with a cult of terrorist semiologists who stalk the countryside of Greece and the Middle East searching out victims among the old, lame, mentally feeble, or otherwise infirm. When they find someone unfortunate enough to have a name whose initials match those of the town he lives in, they beat his head in with claw hammers. Sometimes—though this may actually be the work of a splinter group—they cut his throat with a knife inscribed with the same initials. So whoever said semiotics is fun?

While all this is going on, Axton and Owen Brademas, the brooding archeologist in charge of the dig where Axton's estranged wife works, trade linguistic theory. They talk a great deal about "signs," "events," "preverbal levels" of communication, the "human faith in naming." They discourse on the subtext of the murders. The killings, we hear, "mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror of our souls."

DeLillo, who is at best ambivalent about structures and systems, no doubt intends this as a grand allegory on language. In *Players,* terrorists were the catalyst that brought about a necessary reaction within the system.

1 Knopf, 339 pages, $13.95

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Here the terrorist cult is working a mystical justice, tearing down the structure of language, which imprisons the spirit and obscures the soul. This is perhaps what leads Owen to ask: "Why is the language of destruction so beautiful?"

Ultimately, in this most self-conscious of books, the cult is a metaphor for the novel that contains it. "The world has become self-referring," says one character. This novel certainly is: every sentence seems to be about itself. Even the descriptions are structuralist. Axton, driving his car in the country, sees a mountain range off in the distance: "They were mountains as semantic rudiments, barest definitions of themselves."

They are, then, nothing at all. They have been, in the very act of description, semantically erased. The effect is intentional. Pondering Owen's question about the cult murders, Axton asks himself: "If you think the name of the weapon is beautiful, are you implicated in the crime?" The extent to which DeLillo is implicated can be seen in the way his prose replicates the program of his terrorist cult. His language is self-canceling; it snuffs itself out on the page along with any sense of reality. All that's left is the "mystery" of language—the final point, it seems, of this whole exercise. "I knew at once it was right," says one of the cult members. "I cannot describe how fully and deeply it reached me. Not as an answer, not as a question. Something else totally." It's hard, one assumes, to be specific about such things.

DeLillo tries to invest this novel with a primal mystery and significance—"There is a different signature here, a deeper and austere calculation"—but his linguistic speculations are hardly above the level of cabalism and numerology. Axton meets a strange Arab in a darkly lit bar who possesses secret knowledge: "The river of language is God," he says. "The alphabet is male and female . . . . If you will know the combination you will know life and death." Maybe there are a few Masons left somewhere that can still take this kind of thing seriously.

DeLillo's mystery is no more than a de-based form of what Trilling referred to as the "unconditioned" or "pure spirit," the spirit free of the material circumstances of our existence. According to Trilling, it is this unconditioned spirit that to intellectuals seems so irreconcilable with the determinism of the family and so at odds with the compromises and limitations in society and politics. For DeLillo language, because it signifies reality, represents that determinism and compromise, getting in the way of that "something else totally," whatever it is. Luckily, language can self-destruct, especially with the help of a few semiologists wielding claw hammers.

In David Plante's *The Woods,*[2] we're a long way from the linguistic terrorism of *The Names,* but the novels share many of the same concerns. This brief story of the spring, summer, and fall in the life of an adolescent, Daniel, and his flirtation with an older woman, Lillian, fairly throbs with yearning for the realms of pure spirit. Here, too, this is usually expressed as "something": "He wanted something to happen, he wanted something vast to happen, something all outside him, something way, way outside him." "He had a sense of something so general nothing could particularize it." "He had no idea what that something, which he could only sense, was." Sometimes he longs for "everything." When not mooning about something and everything, Daniel thinks about "space," sometimes "stunning space," usually "space, large and empty." Daniel wonders why "he, with the greatest, most passionate longing, longed for space, the space he sensed so deeply, in which nothing could happen that did happen?"

From paragraph to paragraph, often from sentence to sentence, this short novel is an almost diagrammatic example of the conflict, as it expresses itself in contemporary fiction, between the quotidian and the spiritual. Daniel thinks:

> I know what it means to be married, what it must mean: that the man and the woman do

2 Atheneum, 123 pages, $8.95

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> not see themselves in one another, but see through one another into the world in which they live, into the world of cribs, diapers, school books, shoes, pots and frying pans, votive candles, hammers and wrenches, vacuum cleaners, irons and ironing boards, storm windows and screens, clocks, checkbooks, tables and chairs, worn-out tires, cups of coffee, funeral wreaths . . . .

Beyond this world, Daniel thinks, they do not imagine "any other world," while "I, I imagine so seriously another space." It is a common characteristic of much contemporary fiction that description is reduced to lists of things, which read like nothing so much as lists of grievances, complaints against the thingness of the world that clutters up the way to the soul or spirit. Nowhere, of course, is that way more strewn with the dead, obstructing objects of the material world than in marriage.

Daniel spends the whole summer by a lake in Rhode Island, and Plante spends quite a lot of time detailing his natural surroundings. Most of this description is in black and white ("In the sunlight the lake was white, the trees on the opposite shore grey, the canoe and the figure in the canoe black"), though, as in early Bauhaus, a primary color will sneak in now and again. Daniel also has a tendency to see things as shapes, or in two dimensions. At one point he looks out at the lake from his room: " . . . something happened to his perception which he was clearly aware of happening: all the perspective lines shortened and shortened, and closed, so the lake, the sky, the shore, the trees outside the window, the window itself, went flat." So much for the material world.

Laurie Colwin, whose previous novel, *Happy All the Time,* was about two couples who were just that, happy all the time, has recently learned about paradox, or so it appears. *Family Happiness*[3] is about an unhappy marriage and a happy affair. Polly Demarest is the perfect mother of two perfect children; she lives in a perfect Park Avenue apartment with her lawyer husband, who isn't quite perfect because lately he's been preoccupied with an anti-trust suit. In part out of loneliness and in part out of fatigue from being so perfect, Polly launches on an affair with a painter, Lincoln Bennet, who wears a "briary sweater" and keeps a bed in his studio and a picnic lunch of bread, cheese, wine, and fruit ready for Polly's visits. In short, he's perfect, too. Polly feels a little guilty, but mostly she feels resentful toward her husband, who reads court briefs in bed and is too tired for good sex. The demands of art being apparently less exhausting than those of law, Lincoln is never too tired; but he must go away to Paris for a one-man exhibition. In the meantime the anti-trust suit winds up and Polly's husband, fearful that he's losing her though unaware of the affair, courts her back. Polly decides that she must cut things off with Lincoln, but when she sees him again she can't help herself and falls into his arms: "Nothing had changed. One look at Lincoln and Polly knew it. His big shoulders, his pouty mouth, the way he squinted, the way his hair fell across his forehead . . . ." At first the apparent conflict upsets her ("If you're going to cry," says Lincoln, ". . . you might just want to press yourself against me. I don't mind being all slithery with tears"), but she soon decides to have the best of both worlds: "I love Henry and I love you. I know I'm supposed to think it's wrong, but instead I think it's *mine.* It's my destiny, and my complication." As the novel draws to a close, Polly plans to continue both her marriage and her affair. She feels "her heart break open to love and pain, and to the complexity of things."

According to the book jacket Laurie Colwin has been compared to Colette, Dorothy Parker, and Jane Austen—an interesting assortment. Of course, a plot summary doesn't do the book full justice; one must look at Colwin's characterizations. Polly comes from a family that "had everything: looks, brains, money, a strong, fortified sense of clan, and branches in Boston,

3 Knopf, 272 pages, $12.95

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Philadelphia, and New York as well as London, just like a banking house. The patriarch of the clan was Henry Sollo-Miller." We learn that Polly went to a "fine woman's college," married "a big, handsome lawyer," and produced two "nice, sturdy children." Then she went out and got a "high-level job" for three days a week.

We are not dealing here with character in the usual sense; these are archetypes of the Harlequin Romance variety. Patriarchs, clans, high-level jobs, and the all-purpose adjectives—nice, handsome, etc.—allow swift and easy identification. Of course, what makes *Family Happiness* special is the twist Colwin makes on the usual sort of ending. Colwin presents Polly's decision to deceive her spouse as an act of moral courage. It is so much more complicated, so much more interesting, and, best of all, it's "mine."

On the evidence of *Grace Abounding,*[4] Maureen Howard, who won the National Books Critics' Circle Award for an earlier novel, shares quite a bit with Colwin in a literary way. As *Grace Abounding* opens, Maude Dowd is driving home on back roads, her worn tire near a blowout and her gas gauge reading empty—living on the edge as she sees it—imagining scenes of sex by the roadside: a policeman, "the knob of his erect shift"; a "truck driver jacking me up. He lies in the black cinders of a soft shoulder. My shredded rubber and his good will." Maude fantasizes about a store clerk: "Her bare body and his. They lie ageless, of course not young . . . . 'I never hoped,' he says. The gentle wilt of his penis blooms in the bright light." This, we realize, is poetry; but, even so, can a wilt bloom? Of course, one advantage of being poetical is that you don't have to think; the actualities of the mundane world take a second place to *feeling.* Howard's primary feeling, just like Colwin's, is resentment, the immediate object being men, or the male world. Maude's first husband died *in flagrante* with a mistress, and her second husband, while faithful, is just somehow inadequate, as is her daughter's husband (another anti-trust lawyer, as it happens). Men's alternately brutish and bumbling masculinity crushes female sensitivity.

Unless, of course, the men are painters. There are no painters in *Grace Abounding,* and Howard's dissatisfaction is therefore complete (this is a very pessimistic book); but lately they've been making a strong showing. The heroine of Susan Cheever's first novel, *Looking for Work,* had an affair with a painter named Max, who, if memory serves, wore a briary sweater similar to the one Colwin's painter wears. Bartenders instinctively knew Max's brand of scotch—he was just that kind of guy. Her husband, on the other hand, was bumbling, and, like the husbands in *Family Happiness* and *Grace Abounding,* had a way of falling asleep at the wrong moment. (In the movie *An Unmarried Woman,* Jill Clayburgh found contentment, almost, with Alan Bates, a painter whose singularly sensitive character contrasted sharply with that of her businessman husband.) In Cheever's latest novelistic effort, *The Cage,*[5] a wife, worried that her husband is being unfaithful, locks him in a giant, rusting managerie. After many pages, the husband escapes and is shot by his wife, who takes him for a deer.

All five of these authors are exacting a kind of revenge. The women take it out on the limiting reality of family life, the world of children, meals, and insufficient husbands that frustrates their questing, poetical spirits. The men, their spirits unable to find surcease in the arms of painters, have defined their reality more broadly, and their hostility is more encompassing. DeLillo is, in this respect, the champion. His revenge, through the device of language, just about nullifies reality altogether. One chapter in *The Names* begins with DeLillo's description of an airline terminal as a "vast space, which seems like nothing so much as a container for emptiness." He might have been describing the end point of a certain kind of contemporary fiction.

4 Little, Brown, 175 pages, $13.95

5 Houghton Mifflin, 188 pages, $11.95

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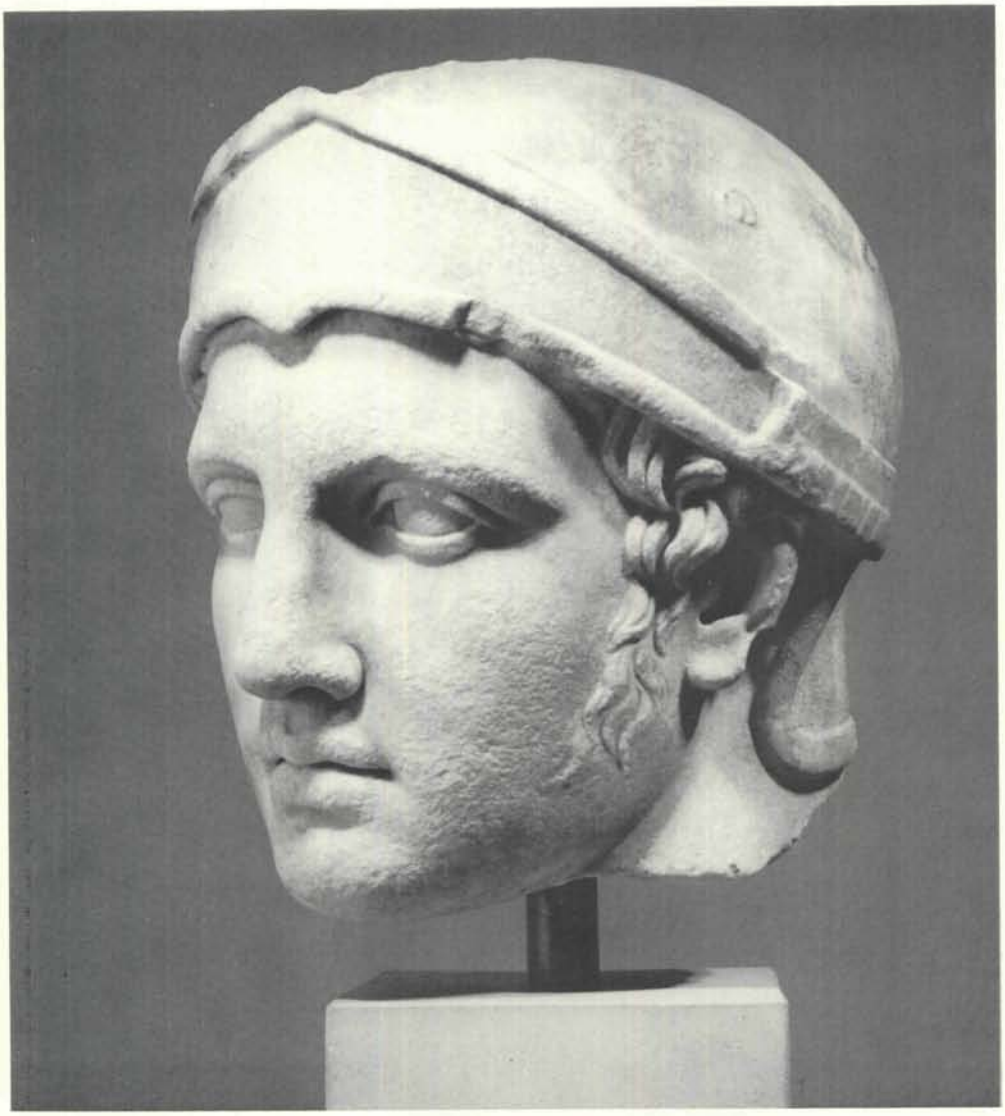

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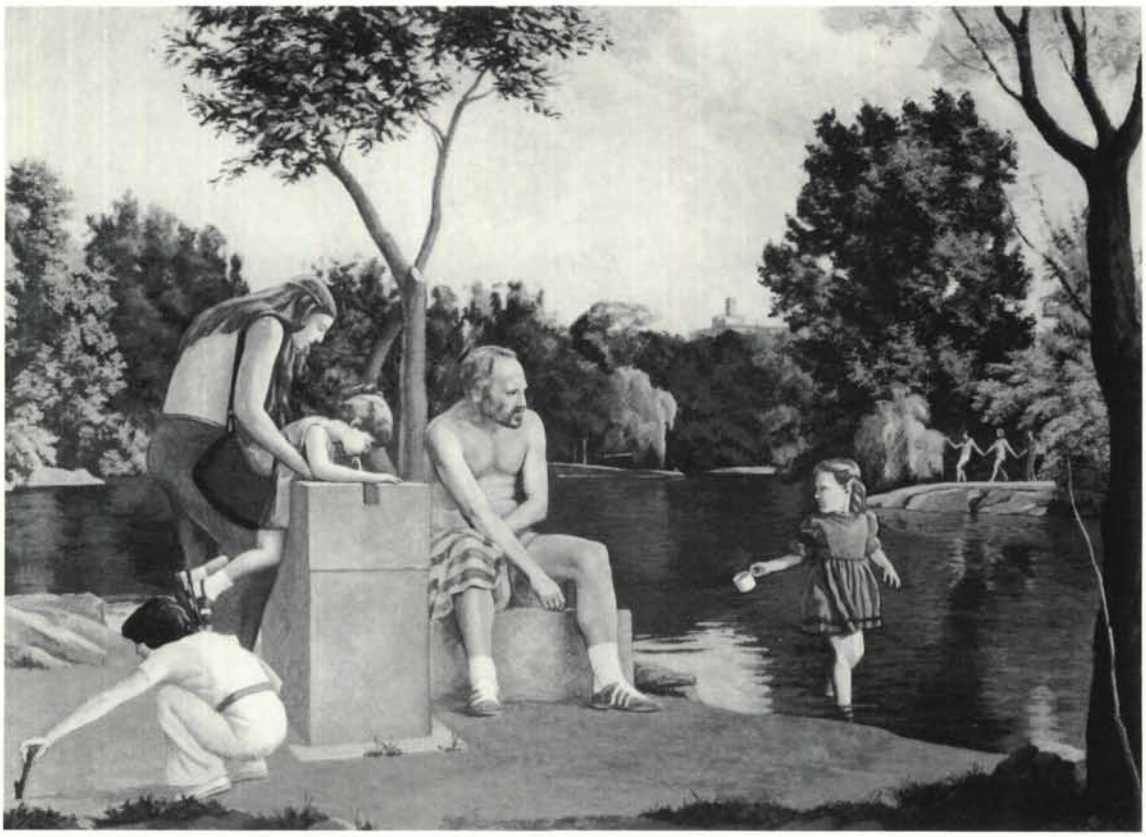

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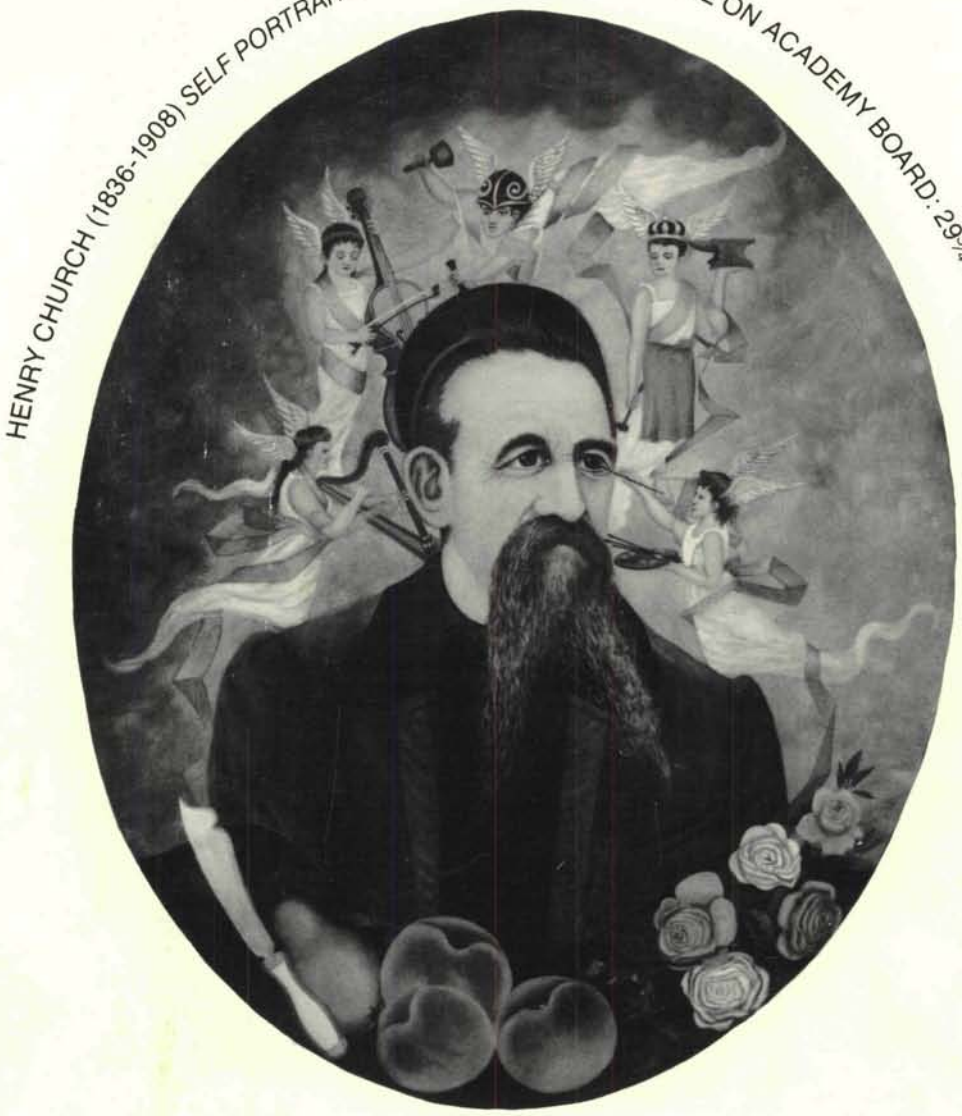

HENRY CHURCH (1836-1908) SELF PORTRAIT WITH FIVE MUSES, c. 1880, OIL ON ACADEMY BOARD: 29¾ x 23½ INCHES

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